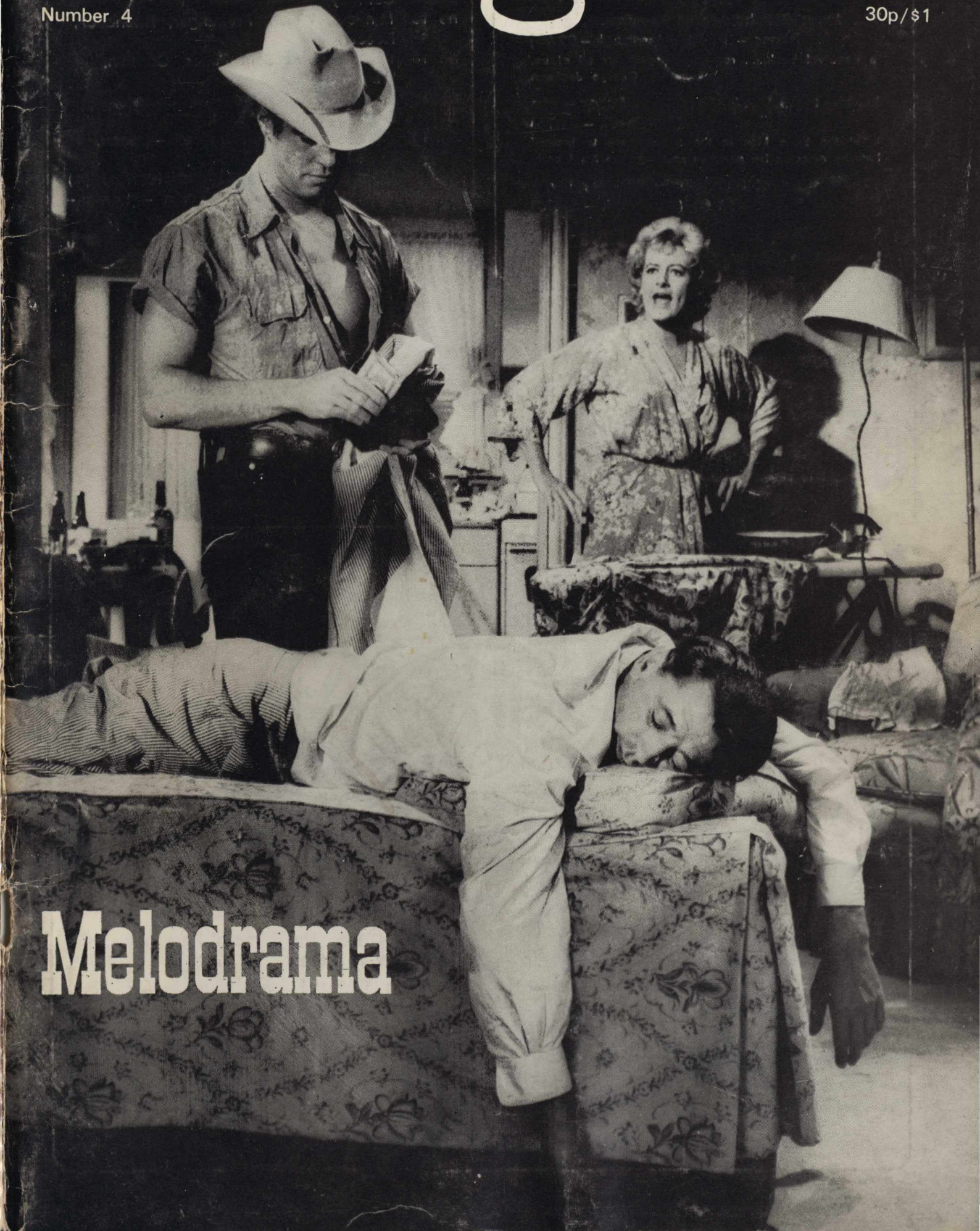


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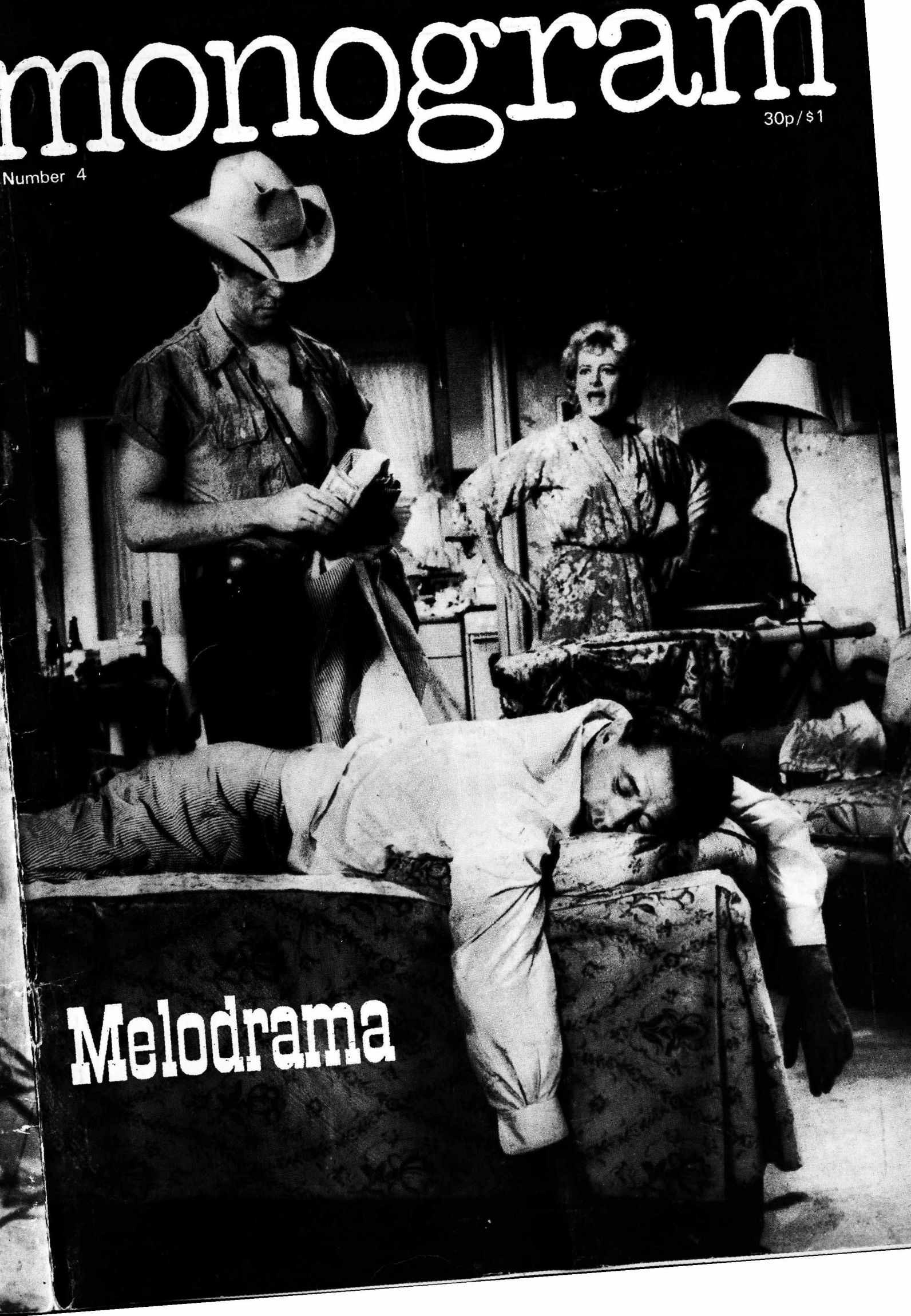


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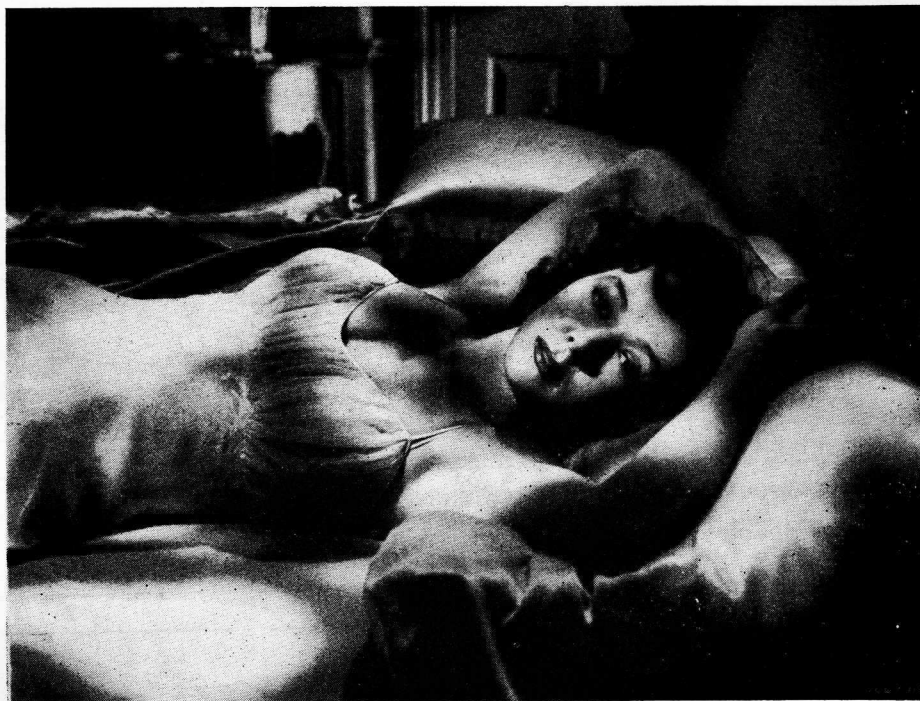
Front Cover Robert Mitchum and George Peppard in Vincente Minnelli's *Home From the Hill*

Back Cover Fred McMurray and Barbara Stanwyck in Douglas Sirk's *There is Always Tomorrow*

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Tales of sound and fury

Observations on the Family Melodrama



Dappling the Dawn with Desire: Gloria Grahame in *The Cobweb*

how to make stones weep

Bearing in mind that (whatever one's scruples about an exact definition) everybody has some idea of what is meant by 'melodramatic', any discussion of the melodrama as a specific cinematic mode of expression has to start from its antecedents — the novel and certain types of 'entertainment' drama — from which script-writers and directors have borrowed their models.

The first thing one notices is that the media and literary forms which have habitually embodied melodramatic situations have changed considerably in the course of history, and, further, they differ from country to country: in England, it has mainly been the novel and the literary gothic where melodramatic motifs persistently crop up (though the Victorian stage, especially in the 1880s and '90s, knew an unprecedented vogue for the melodramas of R. Buchanan and G. R. Sims, plays in which 'a footbridge over a torrent breaks under the steps of the villain; a piece of wall comes down to shatter him; a boiler bursts, and blows

him to smithereens');¹ in France, it is the costume drama and historical novel; in Germany 'high' drama and the ballad, as well as more popular forms like *Moritat* (street-songs); finally, in Italy the opera rather than the novel reached the highest degree of sophistication in the handling of melodramatic situations.

Two currents make up the genealogy. One leads from the late medieval morality play, the popular *gestes* and other forms of oral narrative and drama, like fairy-tales and folk-songs to their romantic revival and the cult of the picturesque in Scott, Byron, Heine and Victor Hugo, which has its low-brow echo in barrel-organ songs, music-hall drama, and what in Germany is known as *Bänkellied*, the latter coming to late literary honours through Brecht in his songs and musical plays, *The Threepenny Opera* or *Mahagonny*. The characteristic features for our present purposes in this tradition are not so much the emotional shock-tactics and the blatant playing on the audience's known sympathies and antipathies, but

rather the non-psychological conception of the *dramatis personae*, who figure less as autonomous individuals than to transmit the action and link the various locales within a total constellation. In this respect, melodramas have a myth-making function, insofar as their significance lies in the structure and articulation of the action, not in any psychologically motivated correspondence with individualised experience.

Yet, what particularly marks the ballad or the *Bänkellied*, i.e. narratives accompanied by music, is that the moral/moralistic pattern which furnishes the primary content (crimes of passion bloodily revenged, murderers driven mad by guilt and drowning themselves, villains snatching children from their careless mothers, servants killing their unjust masters) is overlaid not only with a proliferation of 'realistic' homely detail, but also 'parodied' or relativised by the heavily repetitive verse-form or the mechanical up-and-down rhythms of the barrel organ, to which the voice of the singer

Adapted about the colour in *Written on the Wind*, Douglas Sirk recently replied: 'Almost throughout the picture I used deep-focus lenses which have the effect of giving a harshness to the objects and a kind of enamelled, hard surface to the colours. I wanted this to bring out the inner violence, the energy of the characters which is all inside them and can't break through.' It would be difficult to think of a better way of describing what this particular movie and indeed most of the best melodramas of the 'fifties and early 'sixties are about. Or for that matter, how closely, in a first-rate film, style and technique is related to theme.

adapts itself (consciously or not), thereby producing a vocal parallelism that has a distancing or ironic effect, to the extent of often criss-crossing the moral of the story by a 'false', i.e. unsyntactical emphasis. Sirk's most successful German melodrama, *Zu Neuen Ufern* makes excellent use of the street ballad to bring out the tragic irony in the court-room scene, and the tune which Walter Brennan keeps playing on the harmonica in King Vidor's *Ruby Gentry* works in a very similar way. A variation on this is the use of fairgrounds and carousels in films like *Some Came Running* and *Tarnished Angels*, or more self-consciously in Hitchcock (*Strangers on a Train*, *Stage Fright*) and Welles (*Lady from Shanghai* and *The Stranger*) to underscore the main action and at the same time 'ease' the melodramatic impact by providing an ironic parallelism. Sirk uses the motif repeatedly, cf also *Scandal in Paris* and *Take Me to Town*. What such devices point to is that in the melodrama the *rhythm* of experience often establishes itself against its value (moral, intellectual).

Perhaps the current that leads more directly to the sophisticated family melodrama of the '40's and '50's, though, is derived from the romantic drama which had its heyday after the French Revolution and subsequently furnished many of the plots for operas, but which is itself unthinkable without the C18th sentimental novel and the emphasis put on private feelings and interiorised (puritan, pietist) codes of morality and conscience. Historically, one of the interesting facts about this tradition is that its height of popularity seems to coincide (and this remains true throughout the C19th) with periods of intense social and ideological crisis. The pre-revolutionary sentimental novel — Richardson's *Clarissa* or Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*, for example — go out of their way to make a case for extreme forms of behaviour and feeling by depicting very explicitly certain external constraints and pressures bearing upon the characters, and by showing up the quasi-totalitarian violence perpetrated by (agents of) the 'system' (Lovelace who tries everything, from bribing her family to hiring pimps, prostitutes and kidnappers in order to get *Clarissa* to become his wife, only to have to rape her after all). The same pattern is to be found in the bourgeois tragedies of Lessing (*Emilia Galotti*, 1768) and the early Schiller (*Kabale und Liebe*, 1776), both deriving their dramatic force from the conflict between an extreme and highly individualised form of moral idealism in the heroes (again, non-psychological on the level of motivation) and a thoroughly corrupt yet seemingly omnipotent social class (made up of feudal princes and petty state functionaries). The melodramatic elements are clearly visible in the plots, which revolve around family relationships, star-crossed lovers and forced marriages. The villains (often of noble birth) demonstrate their superior political and economic power invariably by sexual aggression and attempted rape, leaving the heroine no other way than to commit

suicide or take poison in the company of her lover. The ideological 'message' of these tragedies, as in the case of *Clarissa*, is transparent: they record the struggle of a morally and emotionally emancipated bourgeois consciousness against the remnants of feudalism. They pose the problem in political terms and concentrate on the complex interplay of ethical principles, religious-metaphysical polarities and the idealist aspirations typical of the bourgeoisie in its militant phase, as the protagonists come to grief in a maze of economic necessities, *realpolitik*, family loyalties, and through the abuse of aristocratic privilege from a still divinely ordained, and therefore doubly depraved absolutist authority.

Although these plays and novels, because they use the melodramatic-emotional plot only as their most rudimentary structure of meaning, belong to the more intellectually demanding forms of melodrama, the element of interiorisation and personalisation of what are primarily ideological conflicts, together with the metaphorical interpretation of class-conflict as sexual exploitation and rape is important in all subsequent forms of melodrama, including that of the cinema. (The latter in America, of course, is a stock theme of novels and movies with a 'Southern' setting.)

Paradoxically, the French Revolution failed to produce a new form of social drama or tragedy. The Restoration stage (when theatres in Paris were specially licensed to play 'melodramas') trivialised the form by using melodramatic plots in exotic settings, and providing escapist entertainment with little social relevance. The plays warmed up the standard motif of C18th French fiction and drama, that of innocence persecuted and virtue rewarded, and the conventions of melodrama functioned in their most barren form as the mechanics of pure suspense

Carson, Stack, Malone, Hudson in *The Tarnished Angels*



Jane Wyman in *All That Heaven Allows*

— not unlike movies such as Fleischer's *Blind Terror* today mark the sad decline of the psychological thriller into total gratuity.

What before the Revolution had served to focus on suffering and victimisation — the claims of the individual in an absolutist society — was reduced to ground-glass-in-the-porridge, poisoned handkerchiefs and last-minute rescues from the dungeon. The sudden reversals of fortune, the intrusion of chance and coincidence had originally pointed to the arbitrary way feudal institutions could ruin the individual unprotected by civil rights and liberties. The system stood accused of greed, wilfulness and irrationality through the Christ-like suffering of the pure virgin and the selfless heroism of the right-minded in the midst of court-intrigues and callous

indifference. Now, with the bourgeoisie triumphant, this form of drama lost its subversive charge and functioned more as a means of consolidating an as yet weak and incoherent ideological position. Whereas the pre-revolutionary melodramas had often ended tragically, those of the Restoration had happy endings, they reconciled the suffering individual to his social position, by affirming an 'open' society, where everything was possible. Over and over again, the victory of the 'good' citizen over 'evil' aristocrats, lecherous clergymen and the even more conventional villains drawn from the lumpen-proletariat, was re-enacted in sentimental spectacles full of tears and high moral tones. Complex social processes were simplified either by blaming the evil disposition of individuals or by manipulating the plots and engineering coincidences and other *dei ex machina*, such as the instant conversion of the villain, moved by the plight of his victim, or suddenly struck by Divine Grace on the steps of Notre-Dame.

Since the overtly 'conformist' strategy of such drama is quite evident, what is interesting is certainly not the plot-structure, but whether the conventions allowed the author to dramatize in his episodes actual contradictions in society and genuine clashes of interests in the characters. Already during the Revolution plays such as Monvel's *Les Victimes Cloîtrées* or Laya's *L'Ami des Lois*, though working with very stereotyped plots, conveyed quite definite political sympathies (the second, for instance, backed the Girondist moderates in the trial of Louis XVI against the Jacobites) and were understood as such by their public.²

Even if the form might act to reinforce attitudes of submission, the actual working out of the scenes could nonetheless present fundamental social evils. Many of the pieces also flattered popular sympathies by giving the villains the funniest

lines, just as Victorian drama playing east of Drury Lane was often enlivened by low-comedy burlesque put on as curtain raisers and by the servants' farces during the intermission.

All this is to say that there seems a radical ambiguity attached to the melodrama, which holds even more for the film melodrama. Depending on whether the emphasis fell on the odyssey of suffering or the happy ending, and on where and in what context the rupture (moral conversion of the villain, unexpected appearance of a benevolent Capucine monk throwing off his pimp's disguise) occurred, that is to say, depending on what dramatic mileage was got out of the heroine's perils before the ending (and one only has to think of Sade's *Justine* to see what could be done with the theme of innocence unprotected...), melodrama would appear to function either subversively or as escapism — categories which are always relative to the given historical and social context.³

In the cinema, Griffith is a good example. Using identical dramatic devices and cinematic techniques, he could, with *Intolerance*, *Way Down East* or *Broken Blossoms* create, if not exactly subversive, at any rate enlightened and socially committed melodramas, whereas *Birth of a Nation* or *Orphans of the Storm* are classic examples of how melodramatic effects can successfully shift explicit political themes onto a personalised plane. In both cases, Griffith tailored ideological conflicts into emotionally loaded family situations.

*

The persistence of the melodrama might indicate the ways in which popular culture has not only made note of social crises and the fact that the losers are not always those who deserve it most, but has also resolutely refused to understand social change in other than private con-

texts and emotional terms. In this, there is obviously a healthy distrust of intellectualisation and abstract social theory — insisting that other structures of experience (those of suffering, for instance) are more in keeping with reality. But it has also meant a lamentable ignorance of the properly social and political dimensions of these changes and their causality, and consequently it has encouraged increasingly escapist forms of mass-entertainment.

However, this ambivalence about the 'structures' of experience, endemic in the melodramatic mode, has served artists throughout the C19th for the depiction of a variety of themes and social phenomena, while remaining within the popular idiom. Industrialisation, urbanisation and nascent entrepreneurial capitalism have found their most telling literary embodiment in a type of novel clearly indebted to the melodrama, and the national liberals in Italy during the *Risorgimento*, for example, apparently saw their political aspirations reflected in Verdi's operas (cf the opening of Visconti's *Senso*). In England, Dickens, Collins and Reade relied heavily on melodramatic plots to sharpen social conflicts and portray an urban environment where chance encounters, coincidences, and the side-by-side existence of extreme social and moral contrasts were the natural products of the very conditions of existence — crowded tenement houses, narrow streets backing on to the better residential property, and other facts of urban demography of the time. Dickens in particular uses the element of chance, the dream/waking, horror/bliss switches in *Oliver Twist* or *Tale of Two Cities* partly to feel his way towards a portrayal of existential insecurity and moral anguish which fiction had previously not encompassed, but also to explore depth-psychological phenomena, for which the melodrama — as Freud was later to confirm — has supplied the dynamic motifs and the emotional-pictorial decor. What seems to me important in this form of melodrama (and one comes across a similar conception in the sophisticated Hollywood melodramas) is the emphasis Dickens places on discontinuity, on the evidence of fissures and ruptures in the fabric of experience, and the appeal to a reality of the psyche — to which the notions of sudden change, reversal and excess lend a symbolic plausibility.

*

In France it is the works of Sue, Hugo and Balzac that reflect most closely the relation of melodrama to social upheaval. Sue, for example, uses the time-worn trap-door devices of cloak and dagger stage melodrama for an explicitly sensationalist, yet committed journalism. In a popular form and rendered politically palatable by the fictionalised treatment, his *Mystères de Paris* were intended to crusade on such issues as public health, prostitution, overcrowding and slum housing, sanitation, black-market racketeering, corruption in government circles, opium smoking and gambling. Sue exploited a 'reactionary' form for reformist ends, and

putting melos into drama

In its dictionary sense, melodrama is a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects. This is still perhaps the most useful definition, because it allows melodramatic elements to be seen as constituents of a system of punctuation, giving expressive colour and chromatic contrast to the storyline, by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue. The advantage of this approach is that it formulates the problems of melodrama as problems of style and articulation.

*

Music in melodrama, for example, as a device among others to dramatize a given narrative, is subjective, programmatic, 'debussyist'. But because it is also a form of punctuation in the above sense, it is both functional (ie of structural significance) and thematic (ie belonging to the expressive content) because used to formulate certain moods — sorrow, violence, dread, suspense, happiness. The syntactic function of music has, as is well-known, survived into the sound film, and the experiments conducted by Hanns Eisler and T. W. Adorno are highly instructive in this respect.⁴ A more practical demonstration of the problem can be got from the almost farcical account which Lilian Ross gives of how Gottfried Reinhard and his composer chopped about John Huston's *Red Badge of Courage* to give it a smooth dramatic shape, with build-ups and climaxes all in the proper order, which is exactly what Huston wanted to avoid when he shot it.⁵

*

That the status of *parole* and syntax of music or natural sound in the cinematic discourse can be used for non-melodramatic ends is proven by the European silent cinema (though I would exclude Eisenstein whose use of music tends to be melodramatic) — the techniques of Sjöström and Dreyer have led, via Bresson, to Godard, Straub and others who have systematically explored a possible sound/image dialectic. To what extent, however, their films can still be called dramatic is another question.

The same ambiguity, of being both part of the form and the content, applies to another system of primitive melodramatic punctuation (often not recognised as such), namely the moral black-and-white depiction of the characters — villain, hero, innocence unprotected, false friend, despotic father. Only if one insists on looking for psychologically motivated individuals as one's chief aesthetic criterion do they seem irritatingly simplistic. Much of world-literature, from Homer to Boccaccio to Rabelais and Molière, is simplistic in this way. But what we reject as crude moralism may not be exclusively thematic and will appear more revealing if treated in terms of structural oppositions and rhythmic variations. Already in Griffith and Stroheim the simple dualisms of moral contrasts are often subtly undermined by structural parallels. For ex-



Hazel Brooks in Sirk's *Sleep My Love*

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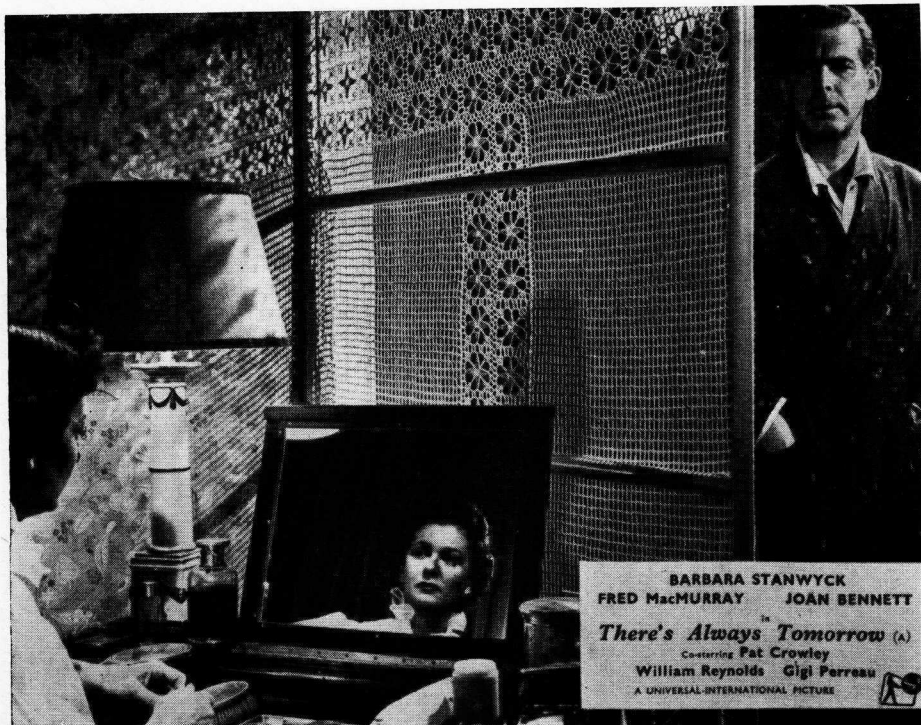
his success, both literary and practical, proved him right. Twenty years later Victor Hugo, who had learnt as much from Sue as Sue had picked up from *Nôtre-Dame de Paris*, produced with *Les Misérables* a super-melodrama spectacular which must stand as the crowning achievement of the genre in the novel. The career of Jean Valjean, from convict and galley slave to factory owner and capitalist, his fall and literal emergence from the sewers of Paris to become a somewhat unwilling activist in the '48 Revolution, is staged with the help of mistaken identities, orphans suddenly discovering their noble birth, inconvenient reappearance of people long thought dead, hair-breadth escapes and rescues, multiple disguises, long-suffering females dying of consumption or wandering for days through the streets in search of their child — and yet, through all this Hugo expresses a hallucinating vision of the anxiety, the moral confusion, the emotional demands, in short, the metaphysics of social change and urban life between the time of Waterloo and 1848. Hugo evidently wanted to bring together in a popular form subjective experiences of crises, while keeping track of the grand lines of France's history, and he succeeds singularly well in reproducing the ways individuals with different social backgrounds, levels of awareness and imaginations, respond to objective changes in the social fabric of their lives. For this, the melodrama, with its shifts in mood, its different *tempi* and the mixing of stylistic levels, is ideally suited: *Les Misérables*, even more so than the novels of Dickens, lets through a symbolic dimension of psychic truth, with the hero in turn representing very nearly the id, the super-ego and finally the sacrificed ego of a repressed and paranoid society.

Balzac on the other hand, uses melodramatic plots to a rather different end. Many of his novels deal with the dynamics of early capitalist economics. The good/

evil dichotomy has almost disappeared, and the manichean conflicts have shifted away from questions of morality to the paradoxes of psychology and economics. What we see is a Schopenhauerian struggle of the will, and the ruthlessness of the industrial entrepreneurs and bankers, the spectacle of an uprooted, 'decadent' aristocracy still holding tremendous political power, the sudden twists of fortune with no-good parasites becoming millionaires overnight (or vice versa) through speculation and the stock-exchange, the antics of hangers-on, parvenus and cynical artist-intellectuals, the demonic, spell-binding potency of money and capital, the contrasts between abysmal poverty and unheard-of affluence and waste which characterised the 'anarchic' phase of industrialisation and high finance, were among other things experienced by Balzac as both vital and melodramatic. His work reflects this more in plot and style than through direct comment.

*

To sum up: these writers all understood the melodrama as a form which carried its own values and already embodied its own significant content: it served as the literary equivalent of a particular, historically and socially conditioned *mode of experience*. Even if the situations and sentiments defied all categories of verisimilitude and were totally unlike anything in real life, the structure had a truth and a life of its own, which an artist could make part of his material. This meant that those who consciously adopted melodramatic techniques of presentation did not necessarily do so out of incompetence nor always from a cynical distance, but, by turning a body of techniques into a psychological principle that carried the distinct overtones of spiritual crisis, they could put their finger on the texture of their social and human material while still being free to shape this material any way they chose. For there is little doubt that the whole conception of life in 19th century Europe and England, and especially the spiritual problems of the age, were often viewed in categories we would today call melodramatic — one can see this in painting, architecture, the ornamentation of gadgets and furniture, the domestic and public *mise-en-scène* of events and occasions, the oratory in parliament, the tractarian rhetoric from the pulpit as well as the more private manifestations of religious sentiment. Similarly, the timeless themes that Dostoyevsky brings up again and again in his novels — guilt, redemption, justice, innocence, freedom — are made specific and historically real not least because he was a great writer of melodramatic scenes and confrontations, and they more than anything else define that powerful irrational logic in the motivation and moral outlook of, say, Raskolnikov, Ivan Karamasov or Kirilov. Finally, how different Kafka's novels would be, if they did not contain those melodramatic family situations, pushed to the point where they reveal a dimension at once comic and tragically absurd — perhaps the existential undertow of all genuine melodrama.



ample, the cat-bird metaphors in *Greed* appear quite complex in the way they criss-cross the Trina-McTeague polarity, and there is a shot of Trina squeezing inadvertently her kitchen sponge and then quickly mopping up the water, when she hears of McTeague having lost his dentist's licence, which serves as a dialectical metaphor of her personality: impulsive underneath her meekness, hypocritical in her greed. Having squeezed McTeague dry, she wants to keep everything for herself.

Such techniques can perhaps be generalised: If hero and villain, for instance, are seen doing trivial acts in a similar way (wash their hands, or eat a fried egg) the apparently non-significant (visual) parallel will help to modify the apparently all-important (moral) contrast. A parallelism on the level of overt intrigue or suspense (a repeated piece of action at a dramatically emphatic point — hero and villain both slamming the door, or passing the same street corner in hot pursuit of the heroine) will on the other hand tend to reinforce the moral contrast. Griffith uses his cross-cutting in both these ways.

This illustrates a principle one might call cinematic counterpoint: in the latter example, stylistic means, ie the lower register of punctuation (parallel montage, cross-cutting, visual repetition, musical accompaniment) serves to intensify the melodic line of the upper register (the story, the intrigue); in the former case, the same techniques are used to construct a different line 'against the current', which if developed consistently, can constitute itself as a theme in its own right.

The difference is one of stylistics, of emphasis or 'soft-peddalling' in the telling of the tale. It is one of the ways American films have always been able to 'contradict' or subvert their manifest moral intent or ideological bias. This is particularly im-

portant when one discusses the melodrama with a happy ending, because the stylistic countercurrent is often so strong that it makes the story and its resolution bristle with a kind of built-in resistance to its own facile optimism — if one cares to look closely.

Because it had to rely on piano accompaniment for punctuation, all silent film drama — from *True Heart Susie*, to *Foolish Wives* or *The Lodger* — is 'melodramatic'. It meant that directors had to develop an extremely subtle and yet precise formal language (of lighting, staging decor, acting, close-up, montage and camera movement), because they were deliberately looking for ways to compensate for the expressiveness, range of inflection and tonality, rhythmic emphasis and tension normally present in the spoken word. Having had to replace that part of language which is sound pattern capable of almost unlimited modulation by pictorial and dynamic values inherent in the medium, directors like Murnau, Renoir, Hitchcock, Mizoguchi, Hawks, Lang, Sternberg achieved in their films a high degree (well recognised at the time) of plasticity in the modulation of optical planes and spatial masses which Panofsky rightly identified as a 'dynamisation of space'.

Among less gifted directors this sensitivity in the deployment of expressive means was partly lost with the advent of direct sound, since it seemed no longer necessary in a strictly technical sense — pictures 'worked' on audiences through their dialogue, and the semantic force of language (once more united into *langue* and *parole*) drowned out and overshadowed the more sophisticated pictorial effects and architectural values. This perhaps helps to explain the decline of the melodrama in favour of action pictures and comedies (with the notable exception of *Borzone*), and also why some major technical innovations, such as

colour, wide-angle and deep-focus lenses, crane and dolly, have in fact encouraged a new form of sophisticated melodrama, with directors (quite a sizeable proportion of whom were imported during the '30s from Germany, and others were clearly indebted to German expressionism and Max Reinhardt's methods of theatrical mise-en-scène) showing a similar degree of visual culture as the masters of silent film-drama: Ophüls, Lubitsch, Sirk, Preminger, Welles, Losey, Ray, Minnelli, Cukor.

Considered as an expressive code, melodrama might therefore be described as a particular form of dramatic mise-en-scène, characterised by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones. Dramatic situations are given an orchestration which will allow for complex aesthetic patterns: indeed, orchestration is fundamental to the American cinema as a whole (being essentially a dramatic cinema, spectacular, and based on a broad appeal) because it has drawn the aesthetic consequences of having the spoken word more as an additional 'melodic' dimension than as an autonomous semantic discourse. Sound, whether musical or verbal acts first of all to give the illusion of depth to the moving image, and by helping to create the third dimension of the spectacle, dialogue becomes a scenic element, along with more directly visual means of the mise-en-scène. Anyone who has ever had the bad luck of watching a Hollywood movie dubbed into French or German will know how important diction is to the emotional resonance and dramatic continuity. Dubbing makes the best picture seem visually flat and dramatically out of sync: it destroys the flow on which the coherence of the illusionist spectacle is built.

That the plasticity of the human voice is quite consciously employed by direc-



Susan Kohner, Sandra Dee in *Imitation of Life*

tors for what are often thematic ends is known: Hawks trained Lauren Bacall's voice so that she could be given 'male' lines in *To Have and Have Not*, an effect which Sternberg anticipated when he took great care to cultivate Marlene Dietrich's diction, and it is hard to miss the psycho-analytic significance of Robert Stack's voice in *Written on the Wind*, sounding as if every word had to be painfully pumped up from the bottom of one of his oil-wells.

If it is true that *langue* in the American cinema loses some of its semantic importance (it rarely transmits 'ideas') in favour of its aspects as sound, then conversely, lighting, montage, decor, etc (in other contexts the more decorative elements) increase their semantic and syntactic contribution to the aesthetic effect. They become part of the content and the structure, ie integral elements of meaning. This, of course, is the justification for giving primary importance to the mise-en-scène over intellectual content or story-value. It is also the reason why the domestic melodrama in colour and wide-screen, as it appeared in the '40's and '50s, is at its best perhaps the most highly elaborated, complex mode of cinematic signification that the American cinema has ever produced, because of the restricted scope for external action determined by the subject, and because everything, as Sirk said, happens 'inside'. To the 'sublimation' of the action picture and the Busby Berkeley/Lloyd Bacon musical into domestic and family melodrama there corresponded a sublimation of dramatic values into decor, colour, gesture and composition of frame, which in the best melodramas is perfectly thematised in terms of the characters' emotional and psychological predicaments.

For example, when in ordinary language we call something melodramatic, what we often mean is an exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human actions and emotional responses, a from-the-sublime-

to-the-ridiculous movement, a foreshortening of lived time in favour of intensity — all of which produces a graph of much greater fluctuation, a quicker swing from one extreme to the other than is considered natural, realistic or in conformity with literary standards of verisimilitude: in the novel we like to sip our pleasures, rather than gulp them. But if we look at, say, Minnelli, who has adapted some of his best melodramas (*The Cobweb*, *Some Came Running*, *Home From the Hill*, *Two Weeks in Another Town*, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*) from generally extremely long, circumstantially detailed popular novels (by James Jones, Irving Shaw et al), it is easy to see how in the process of having to reduce 7 to 9 hours' reading matter to 90-odd minutes, such a more violent 'melodramatic' graph almost inevitably produces itself, short of the whole thing becoming incoherent. Whereas in novels, especially when they are staple pulp fare, the stuffing has a distinct aesthetic and emotional value, the specific values of the cinema (as in poetry and drama) lie in its concentrated visual metaphors and dramatic acceleration rather than in the fictional techniques of dilation. The commercial necessity of compression (being also a formal one) is taken by Minnelli into the films themselves and developed as a theme — that of a pervasive psychological pressure on the characters, an acute sense of claustrophobia in decor and locale, or again, it translates itself into a restless, and yet suppressed energy surfacing sporadically in the actions and the behaviour of the protagonists — which is already part of the subject of a film like *Two Weeks in Another Town*, with hysteria bubbling all the time just below the surface. Also, the feeling that there is always more to tell than can be said leads him to employ a very consciously elliptical narrative, proceeding often by visually condensing the characters' motivation into non-essential (non-diegetic) sequences of images, a method for which

the equivalent in poetry or modern fiction would be the metaphor or metonymy. The shot of the Trevi fountain at the end of a complex scene where Kirk Douglas is making up his mind in *Two Weeks* is such a metonymy, and so is the silent sequence, consisting entirely of what might appear to be merely impressionistic dissolves, in the *Four Horsemen*, when Glenn Ford and Ingrid Thulin go for a ride to Versailles, but which in fact tells and foretells the whole trajectory of their relationship.

Sirk, too, often constructs his films in this way: the restlessness of *Written on the Wind* is not unconnected with the fact that he almost always cuts to movement, and his metonymies really ought to have a chapter to themselves: a yellow sports-car drawing up the gravelled driveway to stop in front of a pair of shining white doric columns outside the Hadley mansion is not only a powerful piece of American iconography, especially when taken in a plunging high-angle shot, but the contrary associations of imperial splendour and vulgar materials (polished chrome-plate and stucco plaster) create a tension of correspondences and dissimilarities in the same image, which perfectly crystallizes the decadent affluence and melancholy energy that give the film its uncanny fascination. Sirk has a peculiarly vivid eye for the contrasting emotional qualities of textures and materials, and he combines them to very striking effect, especially when they occur in a non-diegetic sequence: again in *Written on the Wind*, after the funeral of Hadley Sr., a very black negro servant is seen taking an oleander wreath off the front gate. A black silk ribbon gets unstuck and is blown by the wind along the concrete path. The camera follows the movement, dissolves and dollies in on a window, where Lauren Bacall, in an oleander-green dress is just about to disappear behind the curtains. The scene has no plot significance whatsoever. But the colour parallels black/black, green/green, white concrete/white lace curtains provide an extremely strong emotional resonance in which the contrast of soft silk blown along the hard concrete is registered the more forcefully as a disquieting visual association. The desolation of the scene transfers itself onto the Bacall character, and the traditional fatalistic association of the wind remind us of the futility implied in the movie's title.

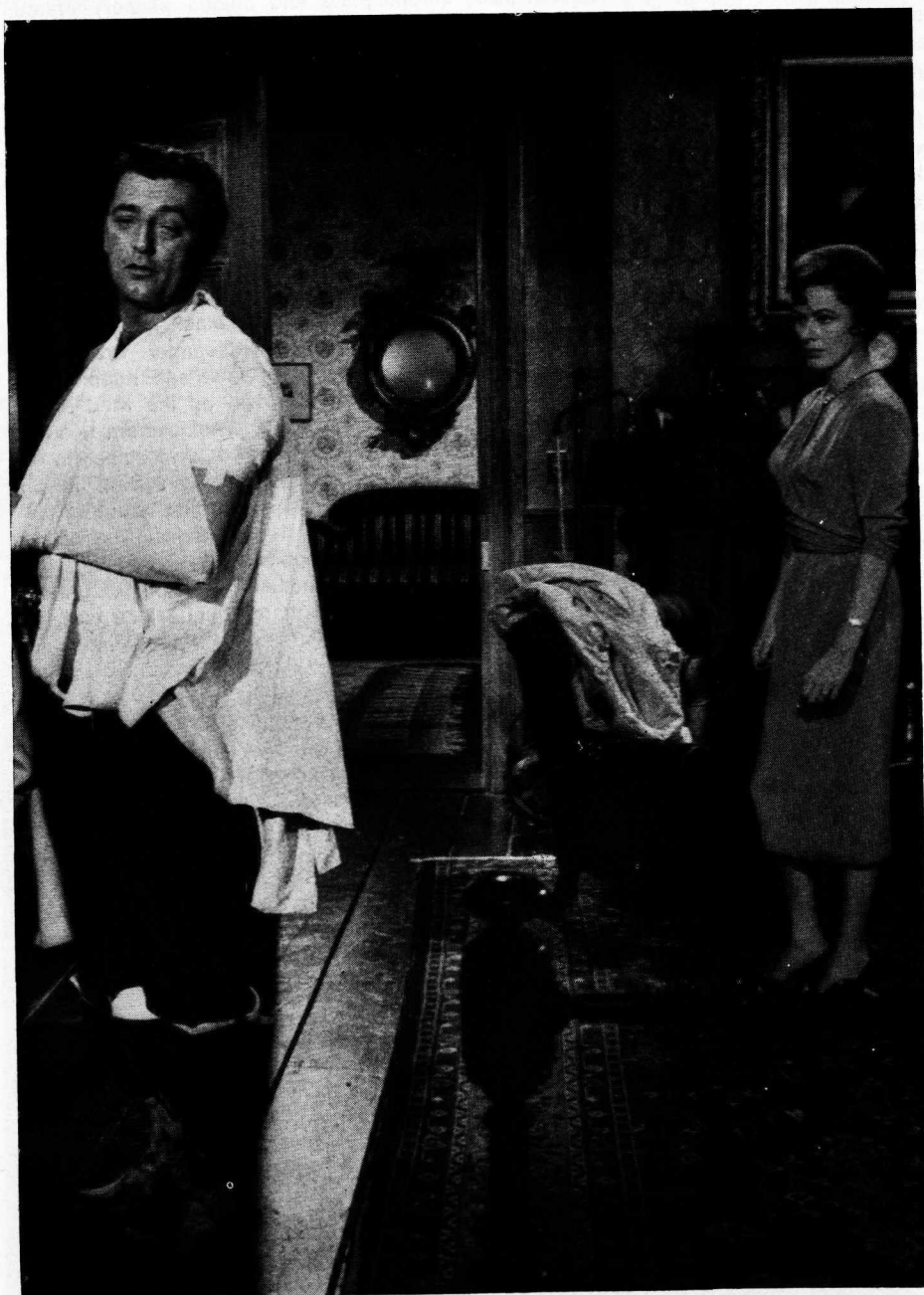
These effects, of course, require a highly self-conscious artist, but they are by no means as rare as the myths about Hollywood lead one to believe. The fact that commercial necessities, political censorship and the various morality codes have restricted directors in what they could tackle as a subject has entailed a different awareness of what constitutes a worthwhile subject, a change in orientation from which sophisticated melodrama benefited perhaps most. Not only did they provide a defined thematic perimeter, but they encouraged a conscious use of form-as-content, which is a mark of what I would consider to be the very

Fate Casts the Shadows: Lana Turner and Kirk Douglas in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (left), Robert Mitchum, Katherine Hepburn and Robert Taylor in *Undercurrent*



condition of modern art. To take another example from Minnelli: his recurrent theme of a character trying to construct the world in the image of his inner self, only to discover that this world has become uninhabitable because it is both frighteningly suffocating and intolerably lonely (*The Long, Long Trailer*, *The Cobweb*) is a transformed and intellectually deepened version of the stock melodrama theme of the woman who, having failed to make it in the big city, comes back to the small-town home in the hope of finding her true place at last, but who is made miserable by mean-mindedness and bigotry and then suffocated by the sheer weight of her none-too-glorious, still-raw-in-the-memory past (*Hilda Crane*, *Beyond the Forest*, *All I Desire*).⁶ But in Minnelli, it becomes an opportunity to explore in concrete circumstances the more philosophical questions of freedom and determinism, especially as they touch the aesthetic problem of how to depict a character who is not constantly externalising himself into action, without thereby trapping him in an environment of ready-

Robert Mitchum, Eleanor Parker in *Home From the Hill*



made symbolism.

Similarly, when Robert Stack shows Lauren Bacall her hotel suite in *Written on the Wind*, where everything from flowers and pictures on the wall to underwear, nailpolish and handbag is provided, Sirk is not only concerned with the theme of a rich man wanting to take over the woman he fancies body and soul, or the oppressive nature of an unwanted gift but he is also making a direct comment on the Hollywood stylistic technique that 'creates' a character out of the elements of the decor, and that prefers actors who can provide as blank a facial surface and as little of a personality as possible — which is in itself perhaps the sign of a society whose moral and emotional values have undergone a systematic process of reification.

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Everyone who has at all thought about the Hollywood aesthetic wants to formulate one of its peculiar qualities: that of direct emotional arousal, whether one calls it 'giving resonance to dramatic situations' or 'fleshing out the cliché' or

whether, more abstractly, one talks in terms of identification patterns, empathy and catharsis. Since the American cinema, determined as it is by an ideology of the spectacle and the spectacular, is essentially dramatic (as opposed to lyrical, ie concerned with mood or the inner self) and not conceptual (dealing with ideas and the structures of cognition and perception), the creation or re-enactment of situations which the spectator can identify with and recognise (whether this recognition is on the conscious or subconscious level is another matter) depends to a large extent on the aptness of the iconography (the 'visualisation') and on the quality (complexity, subtlety, ambiguity) of the orchestration for what are trans-individual, popular mythological (and therefore generally considered culturally 'lowbrow') experiences and plot-structures. In other words, the aesthetic qualities of this type of cinema depend on the ways 'melos' is given to 'drama' by means of lighting, montage, visual rhythm, decor, style of acting, music — that is, on the ways the mise-en-scène translates character into action (not unlike the pre-Jamesean novel) and action into gesture and dynamic space (comparable to 19th century opera and ballet). There is no prime on 'originality' and 'uniqueness' in the literary sense, which is why Parker Tyler's occasional twinges of high-brow conscience (not to mention Pauline Kael's schizophrenia on the subject) are not only unnecessary but fundamentally misplaced.

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Directors with a flair for 'drama' in the more conventionally theatrical sense, but with not much in the way of mise-en-scène, such as Mankiewicz, Curtiz, Lumet and Zinnemann are for this reason on the periphery of the Hollywood style (and have had a correspondingly low rating among serious students of the American cinema), because they appear more European, in the sense that they want to appeal primarily to a culturally literate and literary public, whose idea of aesthetic enjoyment in the cinema is compounded by the canons of good taste and civilised entertainment. This middle-class view of the cinema is on the whole hostile to the melodrama and bothered by its mechanisms of emotional solicitation. Films like *Casablanca*, *The Barefoot Contessa* or *High Noon* have a certain degree of (mildly) intellectual sophistication, but nothing in terms of visual elaboration to compensate for their verbal explicitness, or on the emotional side to make up for their literalness of story and symbolism. From this point of view, they compare unfavourably to their more low-brow, a-moral (though by no means un-intellectual or vulgar) counterparts, such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *To Have and Have Not*, *The Bad and the Beautiful* or *Rio Bravo*.

Leaving aside that preference for the latter movies (or indeed for the qualities of mise-en-scène as a whole) may simply be due to a long-standing and possibly outdated habit, the difference is nevertheless relevant to the argument, insofar as any definition of the American melodrama in

a descriptive sense ought to account for the techniques by which directors make conspicuous use of the cinema's potential to arouse strong emotional-aesthetic responses and structure them in complex patterns, a potential which the former films leave unexplored.

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Not all of the American cinema, however, works with the same full-out emotional involvement I have been suggesting, and not all of it the same way. To begin with, the question of how emotional responses are triggered off and of what kind they are is difficult to assess and may well differ from one person to the next. Secondly, since any identification must to some extent depend on recognition, we still have to distinguish between whether we recognise what the images refer to as something that might happen/has happened within the purview of our own experiences, or whether we recognise it as forming part of our cinematic experience, ie that it reminds us of other movies. No doubt, Westerns work very strongly on recognition responses of the second kind, and there may well be a case for arguing that all our responses only start to become useful for aesthetic analysis when we can distinguish the second-degree responses — what we know about the cinema — from responses to what we know about life.

This granted, there seems to be a further problem which has some bearing on the question of melodrama: although the techniques of audience-orientation and the possibility of psychic projection on the part of the spectator are as much in evidence in a melodrama like *Home From the Hill* or *Splendour in the Grass* as they are in a Western or adventure picture, the difference of setting and milieu is nevertheless strongly reflected in the structure of the dynamic action. In the Western especially, the assumption of an 'open' world is virtually axiomatic; it is indeed one of the constants which makes the form perennially attractive to a largely urban audience, and this openness shows even in films that deal with potential 'melodrama' themes and family situations. The complex father-son relationships in *The Left-Handed Gun*, the Cain-Abel themes of Mann's Westerns (*Winchester 73*, *Bend of the River*), the conflict of virility and mother-fixation in some of Tourneur's Westerns (*Great Day in the Morning*, *Wichita*) or the search for the mother(-country) in Fuller's *Run of the Arrow* are all clarified because the hero can act positively, as a morally free agent, on the changing situations where and when they present themselves. Even in the Walsh adventure pictures, as Peter Lloyd has shown,⁷ identity comes in an often paradoxical process of self-confirmation and overreaching — but always through direct action, while the momentum generated by the conflicts pushes the protagonists forward in an unrelentingly linear course.

The family melodrama, by contrast, though dealing largely with the same oedipal themes of emotional and moral identity, more often records the failure of the protagonist to act in a way that could

shape the events and influence the emotional environment, let alone change the stifling social milieu. The world is closed, and the characters are acted upon. Melodrama confers on them a negative identity through suffering, and the progressive self-immolation and disillusionment generally ends in resignation: they emerge as lesser human beings for having become wise and acquiescent to the ways of the world.

The difference can be put in another way. In one case, the drama moves towards its resolution by having the central conflicts successively externalised and projected into direct action. A jail-break, a bank-robbery, a Western chase or cavalry charge, and even a criminal investigation (apart from creating a distinctive drive pattern) all lend themselves

Rock Hudson in *Written on the Wind*...



...and in *The Tarnished Angels*



to psychologised, thematised representations of the heroes' inner dilemmas and frequently appear that way (Walsh's *White Heat* or *They Died With their Boots On*, Losey's *The Criminal*, Preminger's *Where the Sidewalk Ends*). The same is true of the melodrama in the *série noire* tradition, where the hero is edged on or blackmailed by the *femme fatale* — the smell of honeysuckle and death in *Double Indemnity*, *Out of the Past* or *Detour* — into a course of action which pushes him further and further in one direction, opening a narrowing wedge of equally ineluctable consequences, that usually lead the hero to wishing his own death as the ultimate act of liberation, but where the mechanism of fate at least allows him to express his existential revolt in strong and strongly anti-social behaviour.

Not so in the domestic melodrama: the social pressures are such, the frame of respectability so sharply defined that the range of 'strong' actions is limited. The tellingly impotent gesture, the social gaffe, the hysterical outburst replaces any more directly liberating or self-annihilating action, and the cathartic violence of a shoot-out or a chase becomes an inner violence, often one which the characters turn against themselves. The dramatic configuration, the pattern of the plot makes them, regardless of attempts to break free, constantly look inwards, at each other and themselves. The characters are, so to speak, each others' sole referent, there is no world outside to be acted on, no reality that could be defined or assumed unambiguously. In Sirk, of course, they are locked into a universe of real and metaphoric mirrors, but quite generally, what is typical of this form of melodrama is that the characters' behaviour is often pathetically at variance with the real objectives they want to achieve. A sequence of substitute actions creates a kind of vicious circle in which the close nexus of cause and effect is somehow broken and — in an often overtly Freudian sense — displaced. James Dean in *East of Eden* thinks up a method of cold storage for lettuce, grows beans to sell to the Army, falls in love with Julie Harris, not to make a pile of money and live happily with a beautiful wife, but in order to win the love of his father and oust his brother — neither of which he achieves. Although very much on the thematic surface of Kazan's film (with the characters actually called — if I remember rightly — Cain and Abel), this is a conjunction of puritan capitalist ethic and psychoanalysis which is sufficiently pertinent to the American melodrama to remain exemplary.

The better melodramas, however — those of Ray, Sirk or Minnelli — do not deal with this displacement-by-substitution directly, but by what one might call an intensified symbolisation of everyday actions, the heightening of the ordinary gesture and a use of setting and decor so as to reflect the characters' fetishist fixations. Violent feelings are given vent on 'overdetermined' objects (James Dean kicking his father's portrait as he storms out of the house in *Rebel Without a Cause*), and aggressiveness is worked out by proxy. In such films, the plots have a quite noticeable propensity to form a circular pattern, which in Ray involves an almost geometrical variation of triangle into circle and vice versa,⁸ whereas Sirk (*nomen est omen*) often suggests in his circles the possibility of a tangent detaching itself — the full-circle construction of *Written on the Wind* with its linear coda of the Hudson-Bacall relationship at the end, or even more visually apparent, the circular race around the pylons in *Tarnished Angels* broken when Dorothy Malone's plane can in the last image soar past the fatal pylon into an unlimited sky.

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It is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that the structural changes from linear

externalisation of action to a sublimation of dramatic values into more complex forms of symbolisation, and which I take to be a central characteristic of the melodramatic tradition in the American cinema, can be followed through on a more general level where it reflects a change in the history of dramatic forms and the articulation of energy in the American cinema as a whole.

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As I have tried to show in an earlier article (*Monogram* No 1), one of the typical features of the classical Hollywood movie has been that the hero was defined dynamically, as the centre of a continuous movement, often both from sequence to sequence as well as within the individual shot. It is an optical fact that in order to get its bearing, the eye adjusts almost automatically to whatever moves, and movement, together with sound, completes the realistic illusion, taking the cinematic image out of the limbo of shadow reflections to which earlier film-aesthetics had tried to confine it. Now, it was on the basis of sheer physical movement, for example, that the musicals of the '30s (Lloyd Bacon's *42nd Street* being perhaps the most spectacular example), the gangster movie and the B-thriller of the 40s and early '50s could subsist with the flimsiest of plots, an almost total absence of individual characterisation and rarely any big stars. These deficiencies were made up by focusing to the point of exaggeration on the drive, the obsession, the *idée fixe*, that is to say, by a concentration on the purely kinetic-mechanical elements of human motivation. The pattern is most evident in the gangster genre, where the single-minded pursuit of money and power is followed by the equally single-minded and peremptory pursuit of physical survival,

Women Waiting... Colbert, Jones, Temple in Cromwell's Since You Went Away



ending in the hero's apotheosis through violent death. This curve of rise and fall — a wholly stylised and external pattern which takes on a moral, exemplary significance — can be seen in movies like *Underworld*, *Little Caesar*, *The Roaring Twenties*, *Legs Diamond* and depends at the lowest level on the verve and stamina of the narrative pace, though at a somewhat higher level it permits interesting variations and complexities, as in Fuller's *Underworld USA*. The more sophisticated directors, such as Hawks, have used speed of delivery and the pulsating urgency of action to comic effect (*Scarface*, *20th Century*) and have even applied it to films whose dramatic structure did not naturally demand such a treatment (notably *His Girl Friday*). In fact Hawks' reputed stoicism, if looked at carefully, is little more than a dramaturgical device, whereby sentimentality and cynicism are played so close together and played so fast that the result is an emotional hot-cold shower which is apt to numb the spectator's sensibility into feeling a sustained moral charge, where there is more often simply a very skilled switchboard manipulation of the same basic voltage. (I am thinking especially of films like *Only Angels Have Wings*).

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This unrelenting internal combustion engine of physical and psychic energy, generically exemplified by the hard-boiled, crackling aggressiveness of the screwball comedy, but which Walsh diagnosed in his Cagney heroes as psychotic dynamite (*White Heat*) and a vehicle for extreme redneck republicanism (*A Lion in the Streets*), shows signs of a definite slowing-down in the '50s and early '60s, where raucous vitality and instinctual 'lust for life' is deepened psychologically to intimate neuroses and adolescent or not so adolescent maladjustments of a wider social significance, and where individual initiative is perceived as problematic in explicitly political terms (*All the King's Men*), after having previously been merely stoically and heroically anti-social, as in the film *noir*. The external world is more and more riddled with obstacles which oppose themselves to personal ambition and are not simply overcome by the hero's assertion of a brawny or brainy libido. In Mann's Westerns the madness at the heart of the James Stewart character only occasionally breaks through an otherwise calm and controlled surface, like a strong subterranean current suddenly appearing above ground as an inhuman and yet somehow poetically apt thirst for vengeance and primitive Biblical justice, where the will to survive is linked to certain old-fashioned cultural and moral values — of dignity, honour and respect. And we have it in the films of Sirk, where an uncompromising, fundamentally innocent energy is gradually turned away from simple, direct fulfilment by the emergence of a conscience, a sense of guilt and responsibility, or the awareness of moral complexity, as in *Magnificent Obsession*, *Sign of the Pagan*, *All that Heaven Allows* and even *Interlude* — a theme which in Sirk is always interpreted in terms of cultural decadence.

where freud left his marx in the american home

There can be little doubt that the post-war popularity of the family melodrama in Hollywood is partly connected with the fact that in those years America discovered Freud. This is not the place to analyse the reasons why the United States should have become the country in which his theories found their most enthusiastic reception anywhere, or why they became such a decisive influence on American culture, but the connections of Freud with melodrama are as complex as they are undeniable. An interesting fact, for example, is that Hollywood tackled Freudian themes in a particularly 'romantic' or gothic guise, through a cycle of movies inaugurated possibly by Hitchcock's first big American success, *Rebecca*. Relating his Victorianism to the Crawford-Stanwyck-Davis type 'women's picture', which for obvious reasons became a major studio concern during the war years and found its apotheosis in such movies as John Cromwell's *Since You Went Away* (to the Front, that is), Hitchcock infused his film, and several others, with an oblique intimation of female frigidity producing strange fantasies of persecution, rape and death — masochistic reveries and nightmares, which cast the husband into the rôle of the sadistic murderer. This projection of sexual anxiety and its mechanisms of displacement and transfer is translated into a whole string of movies often involving hypnosis and playing on the ambiguity and suspense of whether the wife is merely imagining it or whether her husband really does have murderous designs on her: Hitchcock's *Notorious* and *Suspicion*, Minnelli's *Undercurrent*, Cukor's *Gaslight*, Sirk's *Sleep My Love*, Tourneur's *Experiment Perilous*, Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door*, all belong in this category, as does Preminger's *Whirlpool*, and in a wider sense Renoir's *Woman on*

the Beach. What strikes one about this list is not only the high number of European émigrés entrusted with such projects, but that virtually all of the major directors of family melodramas (except Ray)⁹ in the 'fifties had a (usually not entirely successful) crack at the Freudian feminist melodrama in the 'forties.

More challenging, and difficult to prove, is the speculation that certain stylistic and structural features of the sophisticated melodrama may involve principles of symbolization and coding which Freud conceptualised in his analysis of dreams and later also applied in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. I am thinking less of the prevalence of what Freud called 'Symptomhandlungen' or 'Fehlhandlungen', that is, when people unconsciously make slips or otherwise project their inner states into interpretable overt behaviour. This is a way of symbolising and signalling attitudes common to the American cinema in virtually every genre and more directly attributable to the metonymic use of detail in the realist novel, rather than to any Freudian influence, though the novel is where Freud himself got it from, as he repeatedly admits. However, there is a certain refinement of this in the melodrama — it becomes part of the composition of the frame, more subliminally and unobtrusively transmitted to the spectator. When Minnelli's characters find themselves in an emotionally precarious or contradictory situation, it often affects the 'balance' of the visual composition — wine glasses, a piece of china or a trayful of drinks emphasise the fragility of their situation — e.g. Judy Garland over breakfast in *The Clock*, Richard Widmark in *The Cobweb* explaining himself to Gloria Grahame, or Gregory Peck trying to make his girlfriend see why he married someone else in *Designing Woman*. When Robert

The bourgeois marriage... mother-in-law, mother, bride in Hilda Crane

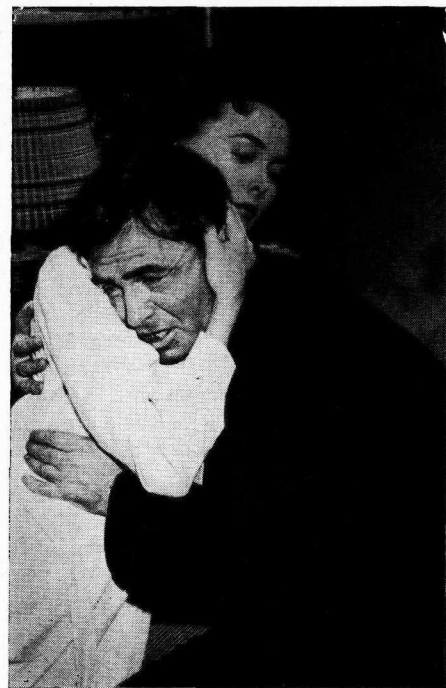


Stack in *Written on the Wind*, standing by the window he has just opened to get some fresh air into an extremely heavy family atmosphere, hears of Lauren Bacall expecting a baby, the most eloquent thing about his misery is the way he squeezes himself into the frame of the half-open window, every word his wife says to him bringing torment to his lacerated soul and racked body.

Along similar lines, I have in mind the kind of 'condensation' of motivation into metaphoric images or sequences of images mentioned earlier, the relation that exists in Freudian dream-work between manifest dream material and latent dream content. Just as in dreams certain gestures and incidents mean something by their structure and sequence, rather than by what they literally represent, the melodrama often works, as I have tried to show, by a displaced emphasis, by substitute acts, by parallel situations and metaphoric connections — that is, by poetic-dramatic devices in the service of subliminal drive-patterns. We know how in dreams one tends to 'use' as dream material incidents and circumstances from one's waking experience during the previous day, in order to 'code' them, while nevertheless keeping a kind of emotional logic going, and even condensing their images into what, during the dream at least, seems an inevitable sequence. The best melodramas often use middle-class American society, its iconography and the family experience in just this way as their manifest 'material', but 'displace' it into quite different patterns, juxtaposing stereotyped situations in strange configurations, provoking clashes and ruptures which not only open up new associations but also redistribute the emotional energies which suspense and tensions have accumulated, break down emotional barriers and let the libidinal energy aroused by the spectacle flow in disturbingly different directions. American movies, for example, often manipulate very shrewdly situations of extreme embarrassment (a blocking of emotional energy) and acts or gestures of violence (direct or indirect release) in order to create patterns of aesthetic significance which only a musical vocabulary might be able to describe accurately, and for which a psychologist or anthropologist might offer some explanation.

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One of the more strictly aesthetic principles involved is that of continuity and discontinuity. To open a parenthesis here, it would seem that there are basically three types of continuity in the filmic discourse which can be played out against each other, and usually are. Continuity of story-line accompanied by visual discontinuity (change of angle, distance of shot, close-up, countershot, travelling etc.: even a bad director will have learnt how to vary the shot as much as possible in order to break up a static set-up say, in a dialogue sequence). More difficult to manipulate is a discontinuity on the level of the plot (ellipsis), and this is often bridged by a visual continuity, more or less obvious or subtle, say a camera movement followed by a tracking-in shot, a dissolve or any other



James Mason, Barbara Rush in *Bigger Than Life*

montage technique capable of creating metonymic chains of associations. Finally, there are the structural and dynamic continuities and discontinuities (what Sirk has called the 'rhythm of the plot') which are less easily defined, and nevertheless are what makes a movie hang together and give it in the last resort aesthetic shape and thematic coherence. These, it seems to me, are particularly complex and varied in the sophisticated melodrama, and I shall only outline one of the more obvious aspects. A typical situation in American melodramas is where the plot builds up to an evidently catastrophic collision of counter-running sentiments, but strings them out nonetheless to get the greatest possible effect from the clash when it does come. In Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful* Lana Turner plays an alcoholic actress who has been 'rescued' by producer Kirk Douglas having given her a new start in the movies. After her first premiere, flushed with success, self-confident for the first time in years, and in happy anticipation of celebrating with Douglas, with whom she has fallen in love, she drives to his home armed with a bottle of champagne. However, we already know that Douglas isn't emotionally interested in her ('I need an actress, not a wife' he later tells her) and is spending the evening with a broad in his bedroom. Lana Turner, suspecting nothing, is met by Douglas at the foot of the stairs, and she, at first too engrossed in herself to notice how cool he is, gets it full in the face when the other girl suddenly appears at the top of the stairs in Douglas' dressing gown. There follows the scene of her nervous breakdown in the car with headlights flashing against her windscreen like a barrage of footlights and arc-lamps.

This letting-the-emotions-rise and then bringing them suddenly down with a thump is an extreme example of dramatic discontinuity, and a similar, vertiginous drop in the emotional temperature

punctuates a good many melodramas — almost invariably played out against the vertical axis of a staircase.¹⁰ In one of the most paroxysmic montage sequences that the American cinema has known, and constructed as if to illustrate the art of musical counterpoint, Sirk has Dorothy Malone in *Written on the Wind* dance on her own, like some doomed goddess from a dionysian mystery, while her father is collapsing on the stairs and dying from a heart-attack. Again, in *Imitation of Life*, John Gavin gets the brush-off from Lana Turner as they are going down some stairs, and in *All I Desire* Barbara Stanwyck has to disappoint her daughter about not taking her to New York to become an actress, after the girl has been rushing downstairs to tell her father the good news. Ray's use of the staircase for similar emotional effects is well-known and most spectacular in *Bigger than Life*, but to give an example from a more conventional director, Henry King, I'd like to quote a scene from *Margie*, a film following rather closely Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis*, where the heroine, Jeanne Crain, about to be taken to the graduation ball by a blind date (whom we know to be her father) since her poetry-loving bespectacled steady has caught a cold, comes tearing down from her bedroom when she hears that the French master, on whom she has a crush, has dropped in. She virtually rips the bouquet of flowers out of his hands and is overwhelmed by joy. The poor guy, with some embarrassment, then has to explain that he is taking somebody else to the ball, that he has only come to return some papers, and Margie, mortified, humiliated and cringing with shame, has just enough time to get back upstairs before she completely dissolves in tears.

All this may not sound terribly profound on paper, but the orchestration of such a scene can produce some rather

strong emotional effects and the strategy of building up to a climax so as to throttle it the more abruptly is a technique of dramatic reversal by which Hollywood has consistently criticised the streak of incurably naive moral and emotional idealism in the American psyche, first by showing it to be often indistinguishable from the grossest kind of illusion and self-delusion, and then by forcing a confrontation when it is most wounding and contradictory. The emotional extremes are played off in such a way that they reveal an inherent dialectic, and the undeniable psychic energy contained in this seemingly so vulnerable sentimentality is utilised to furnish its own antidote, to bring home the discontinuities in the structures of emotional experience which make for a kind of realism and toughness rare if not unthinkable in the European cinema.

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What makes these discontinuities in the melodrama so effective aesthetically is that they occur, as it were, under pressure. Although the kinetics of the American cinema are generally directed towards creating pressure and manipulating it (as suspense, for example), the melodrama presents in some ways a special case. In the Western or the thriller, suspense is generated by the linear organisation of the plot and the action, together with the kind of 'pressure' which the spectator brings to the film by way of anticipation and *a priori* expectations of what he hopes to see; the melodrama, however, has to accommodate the latter type of pressure, as already indicated, in what amounts to a relatively 'closed' world.

This is emphasised by the function of the decor and the symbolisation of objects: the setting of the family melodrama almost by definition is the middle-class home, filled with objects, which in a film like Philip Dunne's *Hilda Crane*, typical of the genre in this respect, sur-

round the heroine in a hierarchy of apparent order that becomes increasingly suffocating. From dad's armchair in the living room and mother's knitting, to the upstairs bedroom, where after five years' absence dolls and teddies are still neatly arranged on the bedspread, home not only overwhelms Hilda with images of parental oppression and a repressed past (which indirectly provoke her explosive outbursts that sustain the action), it also brings out the characteristic attempt of the bourgeois household to make time stand still, immobilise life and fix forever domestic property relations as the model of social life and a bulwark against the more disturbing sides in human nature. The theme has a particular poignancy in the many films about the victimisation and enforced passivity of women — women waiting at home, standing by the window, caught in a world of objects into which they are expected to invest their feelings. The Cromwell movie mentioned earlier, *Since You Went Away*, has a telling sequence when Claudette Colbert, having just taken her husband to the troop-train at the station, returns home to clear up after the morning's rush. Everything she looks at or touches, dressing-gown, pipe, wedding-picture, breakfast cup, slippers, shaving-brush, the dog, reminds her of her husband, until she can't bear it anymore and falls on her bed sobbing. The banality of the objects combined with the repressed anxieties and emotions force a contrast that makes the scene almost epitomise the relation of decor and people in the melodrama: the more the setting fills with objects to which the plot gives symbolic significance, the more the characters are enclosed in seemingly ineluctable situations. Pressure is generated by things crowding in on the characters, life becomes increasingly complicated because cluttered with obstacles and objects that invade the characters' personalities, take them over, stand for them, become more real than the human relations or emotions they were intended to symbolise.

It is yet again an instance of Hollywood stylistic devices supporting the themes, or commenting on each other if used by a conscious director. The melodrama is iconographically fixed by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home and/or the small-town setting, its emotional pattern is that of panic and latent hysteria, reinforced stylistically by a complex handling of space in interiors (Sirk, Ray and Losey particularly excel in this) and a 'thematization' of objects which develop the existentialist antithesis of the individual in a closed society into the more directly philosophical point about a world totally predetermined and pervaded by 'meaning' and in-interpretible signs.

Perhaps this makes another recurrent feature, already touched on, that of desire focussing on the unobtainable object, i.e. the mechanisms of displacement and transfer, more plausible, since one can now see how in an enclosed field of pressure, they open a highly dynamic, yet discontinuous cycle of non-fulfilment, where the discontinuity reinforces the fixation, to create a universe of powerfully

emotional, but obliquely related stimuli and responses. In the melodrama, when consciously employed, violence, the strong action, the dynamic movement, the full articulation and the fleshed-out emotions — so characteristic of the American cinema — become the very signs of the characters' alienation, and thus serve to formulate a devastating critique of the ideology that supports it.

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Minnelli and Sirk are exceptional directors in this respect not least because they can handle stories with four, five or sometimes six characters all tied up in a single configuration, and yet give each of them an even thematic emphasis and an independent point of view. Such skill involves a particularly 'musical' gift. It requires a highly organised formal structure and a sound dramatic conception, but also a very sensitive awareness of the harmonising potential contained in contrasting material and the thematic implications of different characters' motives. Films like *Home From the Hill*, *The Cobweb*, *Tarnished Angels* or *Written on the Wind* strike one as 'objective' films, since they do not have a central hero (even though there may be a gravitational pull towards one of the protagonists) and nonetheless they cohere, mainly because each of the characters' predicaments is made plausible in terms that relate to the problems of the others. The films are built architecturally, by a combination of structural tensions and articulated parts, and the overall design appears only retrospectively, as it were, when with the final coda of appeasement the edifice is complete and the spectator can stand back and look at the pattern. But there is, especially in the Minnelli movies, also a wholly 'subjective' dimension. The films (because the parts are so closely organised around a central theme or dilemma) can be interpreted as emanating from a single consciousness, which is testing or experiencing in dramatic form, the various options and possibilities flowing from an initially outlined moral or existential contradiction.

In *The Cobweb* John Kerr wants both total self-expression and a defined human framework in which such freedom is meaningful, and George Hamilton in *Home From the Hill* wants to assume adult responsibilities while at the same time he rejects the standards of adulthood implied in his father's aggressive masculinity. In the latter the drama ends with a 'Freudian' resolution of the father being eliminated at the very point when he has resigned himself to his loss of supremacy, but this is underpinned by a 'Biblical' one which fuses the mythology of Cain and Abel with that of Abraham blessing his first-born. The interweaving of motifs is achieved by a series of parallels and contrasts. Set in the South, the story concerns the relations of a mother's boy with his tough father, played by Robert Mitchum, whose wife so resents his having a bastard son (George Peppard) that she won't sleep with him again. The plot progresses through all the possible permutations of the basic situation: lawful son/natural son, sensitive George Hamilton/hypochondriac mother, tough

George Peppard/tough Robert Mitchum, both boys fancy the same girl, Hamilton gets her pregnant, Peppard marries her, girl's father turns nasty against the lawful son because of the 'notorious sex-life of his father, etc. However, because the plot is structured as a series of mirror-reflections on the theme of fathers and sons, blood ties and natural affinities, Minnelli is able to give what amounts to an analytical portrait of the sensitive adolescent — but placed in a definite psychological and social context. The boy's consciousness, we realise, is made up of what are external forces and circumstances, his dilemma the result of his social position as heir to his father's estate, unwanted because felt to be undeserved, and an upbringing deliberately exploited by his mother in order to get even with his father, whose own position as a Texan land-owner and local big-shot forces him to compensate for his wife's frigidity by proving his virility with other women. The melodrama here becomes the vehicle for diagnosing a single individual in ideological terms and objective categories, while the blow-by-blow emotional drama creates the second level, where the subjective aspect (the immediate, and necessarily unreflected experience of the characters) is left intact. The hero's identity, on the other hand, emerges as a kind of picture-puzzle from the various pieces of dramatic action.

Home from the Hill is also a perfect example of the principle of substitute acts, mentioned earlier, which is Hollywood's way of portraying the dynamics of alienation. The whole story is kept going by pressure that is applied indirectly, and by desires that always chase unattainable goals: Mitchum forces George Hamilton to 'become a man' though he is temperamentally his mother's son, while Mitchum's 'real' son in terms of attitudes and character is George Peppard, whom he cannot acknowledge for social reasons. Likewise, Eleanor Parker puts pressure on her son in order to get at Mitchum, and Everett Sloane (the girl's father) takes out on George Hamilton the sexual hatred he feels against Mitchum. Finally, after his daughter has become pregnant he goes to see Mitchum to put pressure on him to get his son to marry the girl, only to break down when Mitchum turns the tables and accuses him of blackmail. It is a pattern which in an even purer form appears in *Written on the Wind*: Dorothy Malone wants Rock Hudson who wants Lauren Bacall who wants Robert Stack who just wants to die. *La Ronde à l'Américaine*. The point is that the melodramatic dynamism of these situations is used by both Sirk and Minnelli to make the emotional impact 'carry over' into the very subdued, apparently neutral, sequences of images that so often round off a scene and which thereby have a strong metaphoric quality.

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One of the characteristic features of melodramas in general is that they concentrate on the point of view of the victim: what makes the films mentioned above exceptional is the way they manage to present all the characters convincingly

On the staircase in *Bigger Than Life*: Walter Matthau and James Mason



as victims. The critique — the questions of 'evil', of responsibility — is firmly placed on a social and existential level, away from the arbitrary and finally obtuse logic of private motives and individualised psychology, which in art more often leads to a kind of barren naturalism. This is why the melodrama, at its most accomplished, seems capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society, especially the relation between psychology, morality and class-consciousness, by emphasising so clearly an emotional dynamic whose social correlative is a network of external forces directed oppressively inward, and with which the characters themselves unwittingly collude to become their agents. In Minnelli, Sirk, Ray, Cukor and others, alienation is recognised as man's basic condition, fate is secularised into the prison of social conformity and psychological neurosis, and the linear trajectory of self-fulfilment so potent in American ideology is twisted into the downward spiral of a self-destructive urge seemingly possessing a whole social class.

This typical masochism of the melodrama, with its incessant acts of inner violation, its mechanisms of frustration and over-compensation, is perhaps brought most into the open by the characters who have a drink problem (cf *Written on the Wind*, *Hilda Crane*, *Days of Wine and Roses*). Although alcoholism is too common an emblem in films and too typical of middle-class America to deserve a close thematic analysis, drink does become interesting in movies where its dynamic significance is developed and its qualities as a visual metaphor recognised: wherever characters are seen swallowing and gulping their drinks as if they were swallowing their humiliations along with their pride, vitality and the life-force have become palpably destruc-

tive, and a phoney libido has turned into real anxiety. *Written on the Wind* is perhaps the movie that most consistently builds on the metaphoric possibilities of alcohol (liquidity, potency, the phallic shape of bottles). Not only is its theme an emotional drought that no amount of alcohol, oil pumped by the derricks, or petrol in fast cars and planes can mitigate, but it also has Robert Stack compensate for his sexual impotence and childhood guilt feelings by hugging a bottle of raw corn every time he feels suicidal, which he proceeds to smash in disgust against the paternal mansion. In the same movie, Stack is making unmistakeable gestures with an empty Martini bottle in the direction of his wife, and an unconsummated relationship is visually underscored when two brimful glasses remain untouched on the table, as Dorothy Malone does her best to seduce an unresponsive Rock Hudson at the family party, having previously poured her whiskey into the flower vase of her rival, Lauren Bacall.

Melodrama is often used to describe tragedy that doesn't quite come off: either because the characters think of themselves too self-consciously as tragic or because the predicament is too evidently fabricated on the level of plot and dramaturgy to carry the kind of conviction normally termed 'inner necessity'. Now, in some American screen melodramas the inadequacy of the character's responses to their predicament becomes itself part of the subject. In Cukor's *The Chapman Report* and Minnelli's *The Cobweb* — two movies explicitly concerned with the impact of Freudian notions on American society — the protagonists' self-understanding as well as the doctors' attempts at analysis and therapy are shown to be either tragically or comically inadequate to the situations that the characters are supposed to cope with in every-

day life. Pocket-size tragic heroes and heroines, they are blindly grappling with a fate real enough to cause intense human anguish, which as the spectator can see, however, is compounded by social prejudice, ignorance, insensitivity on top of the bogus claim to scientific objectivity by the doctors. Claire Bloom's nymphomania and Jane Fonda's frigidity in the Cukor movie are seen to be two different but equally hysterical reactions to the heavy ideological pressures which American society exerts on the relations between the sexes. *The Chapman Report*, despite having apparently been cut to ribbons by Daryl F. Zanuck Jr., remains an extremely important movie partly because it treats its theme both in the tragic and the comic mode, without breaking apart, underlining thereby the ambiguous springs of the discrepancy between displaying intense feelings and the circumstances to which they are inadequate — usually a comic motif but tragic in its emotional implications.

Both Cukor and Minnelli, however, focus on how ideological contradictions are reflected in the characters' seemingly spontaneous behaviour — the way self-pity and self-hatred alternate with a violent urge towards some form of liberating action, which inevitably fails to resolve the conflict. The characters experience as a shamefully personal stigma what the spectator (because of the parallels between the different episodes in *The Chapman Report*, and the analogies in the fates of the seven principal figures of *The Cobweb*) is forced to recognise as belonging to a wider social dilemma. The poverty of the intellectual resources in some of the characters is starkly contrary to society, one gets a clear picture of a person's inner life, and as one sees them helplessly struggling inside their emotional prisons with no hope of realising to what degree they are the victims of how a certain individualism reinforces social and emotional alienation, and of how the economics of the psyche are as vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation as is a person's labour.

The point is that this inadequacy has itself a name, relevant to the melodrama as a form: irony or pathos, which both in tragedy and melodrama is the response to the recognition of different levels of awareness. It privileges the spectator vis-à-vis the protagonists, for he registers the difference as an aesthetic effect, rather misleadingly translated as 'pity' from Aristotle. Pathos results from non-communication or silence made eloquent — people talking at cross-purposes (Robert Stack and Lauren Bacall when she tells him she's pregnant in *Written on the Wind*), a mother watching her daughter's wedding from afar (Barbara Stanwyck in *Stella Dallas*) or a woman returning unnoticed to her family, watching them through the window (again Barbara Stanwyck in *All I Desire*) — where highly emotional situations are underplayed to present an ironic discontinuity of feeling or a qualitative difference in intensity, usually visualized in terms of spatial distance

and separation.

Such archetypal melodramatic situations activate very strongly an audience's participation, for there is a desire to make up for the emotional deficiency, to impart the different awareness, which in other genres is systematically frustrated to produce suspense: the primitive desire to warn the heroine of the perils looming visibly over her in the shape of the villain's shadow. But in the more sophisticated melodramas this pathos is most acutely produced through a 'liberal' mise-en-scène which balances different points of view, so that the spectator is in a position of seeing and evaluating contrasting attitudes within a given thematic framework — a framework which is the result of the total configuration and therefore inaccessible to the protagonists themselves. The spectator, say in Preminger's *Daisy Kenyon* or a Ray movie is made aware of the slightest qualitative imbalance in a relationship and also sensitised to the tragic implications which a radical misunderstanding or a misconception of motives might have, even when this is not played out in terms of a tragic ending.

If pathos is the result of a skilfully displaced emotional emphasis, it is frequently used in melodramas to explore psychological displacement through repression, usually in conjunction with the theme of inferiority; inadequacy of response in the American cinema often has an explicitly sexual code: male impotence and female frigidity — a subject which allows for thematisation in various directions: not only to indicate the kinds of psychological anxiety and social pressures which generally make people sexually unresponsive, but as metaphors of unfreedom in a more philosophical sense (Hitchock's frigid heroines), or to interpret the mechanisms of overcompensation as a quasi-metaphysical 'overreaching' (as in Ray's *Bigger than Life*). In Sirk, where the theme has an exemplary status, it is treated as a problem of 'decadence' — where intention, awareness, yearning, outstrip performance — sexual, social, moral. From the Willi Birgel character in *Zu Neuen Ufern* onwards, Sirk's most impressive characters are never up to the demands which their lives make on them, though some are sufficiently sensitive, alive and intelligent to feel and know about this inadequacy of gesture and response. It gives their pathos a tragic ring, because they take on suffering and moral anguish knowingly, as the just price for having glimpsed a better world and having failed to live it. A tragic self-awareness is called upon to compensate for lost spontaneity and energy, and in movies like *All I Desire* or *There's Always Tomorrow*, where as so often, the fundamental irony is in the titles themselves, this theme which has haunted the European imagination at least since Nietzsche, is absorbed into an American small-town atmosphere, often revolving around the questions of dignity and responsibility, and how to step down, how to yield when confronted with true talent and true vitality — in short, those qualities that dignity is called upon to make up for.

In the Hollywood melodrama characters made for operettas play out the tragedies of mankind (or at least those of American civilization). Small wonder they are constantly baffled and amazed, as Lana Turner is in *Imitation of Life*, about what is going on around them and within them. The contradiction of seeming and being, of intention and result, registers as a perplexing frustration, and an ever-increasing gap opens between the emotions and the reality they seek to reach. What strikes one as the true pathos is the very mediocrity of the human material, putting such high demands upon itself, trying to live up to an exalted vision of man, but instead living out the impossible contradictions that have turned the American dream into its proverbial nightmare, having been too often on the verge of hypocrisy, hysteria or plain stupidity. It makes the best American melodramas of the 'fifties not only critical social documents but genuine tragedies, despite, or rather because of the 'happy ending': they record some of the agonies that have accompanied the demise of the 'affirmative culture' spawned by liberal idealism, advocating with open, conscious irony that the remedy applied is more of the same. But even without the national disasters that have overtaken America in the last five years, this irony, too, almost seems now to belong to a different age.

Thomas Elsaesser



Tom Neal and Ann Savage in Ulmer's *Detour*

famille, pas de mélo! Pour qu'il y ait mélo, il faut avant tout qu'il y ait faute, péché, transgression sociale. Or, quel est le milieu idéal pour que se développe cette gangrène, sinon cette cellule familiale, liée à une conception hiérarchique de la société? (Cinéma 71, no 161, p 46).

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Aspects of Melodrama



The 'United Artists'
Griffith, Pickford, Chaplin

In general, melodrama is a term of little critical value; it has been so corrupted in common usage that to give it a more specific field of reference is a task which almost verges on the impossible. On the other hand, it ought to be attempted because of the important role that melodrama has played in American culture and because of the influence it has exercised over the development of the American cinema.

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Melodrama is both vague and highly pejorative largely because it designates an area of exclusion rather than inclusion — that is to say, everything that does not fall within the purview of bourgeois drama and the well-made play. Melodramatic is everything that violates criteria of verisimilitude and probability that a middle class audience has become disposed to accept — where this audience demands a realism in terms of milieu, costume and gesture; in the presentation of social class and class differences; a concern with motivation that will faithfully reflect the balancing of various considerations and the felicitic calculus that characterises ordinary life, melodrama is frankly indifferent to these considerations: it is romantic, escapist and flies in the face of every reasonable expectation.

Characteristic of melodrama is:

- (a) a tendency to place the hero and/or heroine on a privileged level;
- (b) strong audience identification and a tendency to dissolve the boundary between what a character feels and what the audience feels;
- (c) a disinterest in nuances of social class and a tendency to rank characters, not socially, but across a sharply defined moral spectrum of good and evil;
- (d) a tendency to work the action towards bold and effective climaxes and strong local effects, which are presented

for their own sake;

- (e) the use of spectacle and the inclusion of dramatic action or suspense sequences;
- (f) the unmotivated, unprepared, unexpected and immediate;
- (g) a rigging of the development of the action in the direction of wish-fulfillment with a consequent tendency to evade rather than to resolve the conflicts that have been the focus of the drama.

Both the melodrama and the bourgeois novel are conditioned by puritan ideology; in both the conception of life as a long and weary journey through a vale of tears and tribulations, for which fortitude and a certain stoicism are essential character traits, is accompanied by the expectation that, in the long run, virtue will be rewarded here on earth — in defiance both of dogma and of strict probability.

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In America the norms of bourgeois drama were slow to establish themselves. Puritanism for long inhibited the development of the theatre and it was only in the late nineteenth century that the basis for such a drama emerged: both materially, in terms of a fashionable monied class willing and able to support theatre and the opera, and thematically, in the form of a comedy of manners that could centre on conflicts between old and new money, between native and foreign aristocracies (in James and Wharton as well as in the theatre). However, by this time the melodrama was already well-established. Bornson Howard, America's first professional dramatist, was reared in the traditions of melodrama even though he came to write social plays. David Belasco, one of the most successful of the new impresarios who appeared at the end of the century was a melodrama specialist, who amongst other things, was the source for the libretto of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Strong, emotive, often sentimental stories

*every article
about the
cinema ought
to talk about
Griffith*

(Godard)

of this kind became a staple of American culture — in the theatre, on the silent screen, in the new art of the 'musical'. And even a writer like Eugene O'Neill owes far more to the traditions of American melodrama, than he does to the European well-made play.

The cinema proved to be admirably adapted to the demands of melodrama: it was ideal for action and spectacle; intercutting created new forms of suspense; Griffith's invention of the close-up placed the star on a privileged level and created a strong sense of audience involvement. The silent cinema was the culmination of melodrama, creating an oneiric world of fantasy and desire. However, all this was shattered by the coming of sound. The importance of dialogue, gesture, intonation, the corresponding demand for a greater verisimilitude led to the eclipse of melodrama in favour of the sophistication of skills of the European well-made play — a turning point that was reflected in the supremacy of Lubitsch.

However, there can be little doubt that much of what we value in the American cinema today stems from this melodrama tradition in general, and from Griffith's specific translation of it into the film medium. It is, of course, easy to lay stress on the crudities, on the moral stereotypes and the element of wishfulfillment, and the forcing of situations into well-run and familiar channels continues to be the most significant limiting factor in the American cinema but against that, there is the real complexity and immediacy of the relationship which an audience establishes with a star, the tendency to respond to characters as individuals rather than to rank them socially, the effective dissolution of moral and social taboos which identification with a star and a situation can create, the readiness to risk strong, sentimental, even

embarrassing scenes, to resort to and go beyond cliché. The American cinema has been heavily self-censored and severely curtailed and constricted in its scope, yet for all that it has been strangely uninhibited. For in the cinema, love, hate, grief, joy, eroticism, violence cease to be concepts and verbal counters and become realities which the spectator must confront and reckon with.

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Ford's *Pilgrimage* (1933) seems to me a classic instance of the doublesidedness of the American cinema's tradition of melodrama. The story itself is crude, corny and sentimental yet in the hands of Ford it acquires moments of authenticity and is often genuinely moving. Ford alternates scenes of slapstick and uproarious humour with incidents of extreme seriousness with quite astonishing boldness, without subordinating one to the other and without trying to establish some kind of equalisation between them. Each scene is done for its own sake and it is this that guarantees the picture's integrity. In the past great art has been notable for the skill and sophistication of its transitions, in a way that implies mutual subordination and an organic relation of parts (e.g. the theory of 'comic relief'). Yet Ford's swift transitions and changes of tone are impressive because they fully convey the disconnectedness and lack of significant relation between different areas of experience. The power of the moment in *Wagonmaster* (1950), when the arrival of the outlaws breaks up the dance on the wagon train is that (as so often in the

films of Ford) it registers so dramatically the gulf between different worlds — more-over in its expressive use of montage — a sequence of silent close-ups on the faces of the intruders — it makes effective use of the stylistic tradition of the silent cinema.

Thus, more generally, if the American cinema has developed out of melodrama it has also developed prophylactics against it: it has found ways of tapping the crude power of melodrama while subtly reconstituting the elements in such a way as to bypass the dangers of moralism and sentimentality. For melodrama undoubtedly is moralistic and never more so than in its heart-warming or heart-rending conclusions. As Sirk himself pointed out in a recent discussion, *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* is not melodrama, because of its episodic nature and because of the fragmentation of the narrative line. What distinguishes the work of Sirk, from that of, say, a David Lean, is that he does not allow the whole significance of the action to go into one or two episodes. Meaning is articulated through the total pattern of events and the dangers of the picturesque, so evident in Lean, are decisively skirted. And by the picturesque, I mean the tendency for certain scenes to be composed in such a way that they are separated from the rest of the action, as if surrounded by a frame, so that the audience is invited to shut their eyes to the implications of the scene when set against a wider context. The scene does not carry the weight of the whole film behind it but serves as a kind of surrogate for

the fact that this cannot be achieved.

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Directors like Sirk and Tourneur are able to condition an audience's response to the work by the way in which they juxtapose scenes, throw unexpected elements into prominence, while presenting conventional conclusions in a purely formal way. Thus, to take a case in point, there is no exhilaration at all in the ending of *Canyon Passage* as Dana Andrews rides west. It is presented quite neutrally — as if to say, well, this is how a film like this ends — and the conclusions cannot contradict the sombre tone of the rest of the film. Minnelli and Preminger go for strong scenes but they are always aware of the need to work for their effects and to convince an audience of the reality of a character's predicament. In the game of melodrama the stakes were always high and it was a matter of all or nothing — sometimes the director succeeded, but on other occasions the material proved intractable. That, so often, has been the story of the American cinema. Yet this crude melodrama produced movies that were artistically far superior to the sophisticated melodrama of today, which lacks the vital energy of its predecessors, and which instead of subverting its more debased effects, actually works very hard at reinforcing them. Perhaps this reflects a greater awareness of the relationship between melodrama and ideology, a willingness to accept, or acquiesce in the fact that the project may be corrupted from the start.

David Morse

*some affairs
to remember:
the style of
Leo McCarey*



Cary Grant, Deborah Kerr in *An Affair to Remember*

The notion of the individual artist in Hollywood has always manifested itself in terms of the struggle with the conventions of the genre, and much of the most interesting work done in the classical American Cinema reflects just this conflict, the tension resulting from conventions stretched to the limit by the exigencies of an individual vision. But it is important to remember the part that tradition is here playing in its own im-

minent destruction: it is an almost suicidal one, showing what is both strength and limitation. In its cinema, America has always displayed an irksome self-awareness and self-criticism, particularly in the alien vision of its emigrés, and operating on two levels, both as criticism of its social foundations (cf. the films of Lang) and through an oblique viewpoint on the springs of energy at the root of the action ethos (cf. the work of Jacques Tourneur).

Nevertheless, it remains true that the tradition to which directors as critical as Lang and Tourneur can be traced is that of the largely original, indigenous narrative forms of the American Cinema — particularly in the work of the former one finds the gradual shedding of his expressionist background, culminating in *Fury* (1936), an excellent example of how Hollywood incorporated and usurped extraneous influences.

The above remarks are straightforward enough: my object is to relate them to current discussion of the role of the melodrama in the American Cinema, centred on the use certain directors have made of the genre: if we are to believe recent criticism, Minnelli has used it as the foundation for a reality/fantasy dialectic (and one critic has even seen fit to lump McCarey and Borzage in with this idea), and, more importantly, the highly-charged symbolism of Douglas Sirk has inverted it so as to entirely disassociate the director's films from the prevalent 'bourgeois' ideology expounded in the melodrama. I am not at all persuaded that such a disassociation in fact takes place, and I feel that it would be a mistake to interpret a critical viewpoint as a rejection of the emotional structure propounded continually by the narrative techniques that Hollywood established, an emotional structure which cannot be separated from the 'bourgeois' ideology of the American Cinema. But to clarify this, one needs to make some general remarks on the nature of the melodrama itself.

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The history of the melodrama is partly static, insofar as it is uniquely bound up with the familiar Hollywood technique of the re-make. But the genre begins to reveal itself in the fifties, when the formal conventions of the American Cinema were on the wane, although to pinpoint such a crack-up exactly is naturally almost impossible, and varies from genre to genre. It seems to me that the melodrama — a specifically 'human' genre, depicting stylised situation, characters, and relationships not so far removed from ordinary experience as the western or the musical — was Hollywood's typical response to the relaxed censorship of the period, the demand for a more 'adult' kind of entertainment, and the challenge of tv. The demand was for a more realistic kind of treatment, the depiction of conflicts removed from the comfortable metaphors of genre. But the paradox is that at the moment when American films might appear to be treating of these more realistic situations (specifically those of middle-class America), they become more intensely *symbolic*, more highly stylised than previously. The reason is quite simple: with the demise of genre, Hollywood's style was bereft of its primary means of expression, its system of conventions hitherto applicable to large areas of human experience. A profusion of metaphors, privileged to treat unspoken areas of this experience went overboard with this decline in their validity: and the result was almost a return to an early primitivism whereby the American Cinema fell back on a dramatic codification of mere, ordinary 'reality', thereby pushing situation more explicitly into symbol. The pegs on which earlier schemes of narrative had hung had been pulled out, and in the myth of middle-class America more pegs had to be found. I think that the self-consciousness that has destroyed the traditional Hollywood started here, for the American Cinema found itself searching its own psyche for means of expression:

and the response was to push events of a common reality to the myth of extremes, ransacking it for simplifications. The finest American melodramas bear this out if one comes to consider their extraordinary obsession with ritual and catharsis, situations extrapolated to their furthest degree, towards death and expiation. In *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), Sirk carries the plot through to Rock Hudson's near-death at the precise moment when he is on the verge of resuming his relationship with Jane Wyman, before pulling us back to the coda of the happy ending. In *Some Came Running* (1959), Minnelli shows us in sacrificial terms the inevitable death of the innocent, Shirley MacLaine, as a necessary element in the spiritual regeneration of the film's hero. In *Strangers When We Meet* (1960), Quine demonstrates that architect Kirk Douglas must construct and finish his dream house with its symbolic relation to his ideal but illicit affair with Kim Novak before realising that they can never live in it: and so on. But at the moment when Hollywood seems to be stabbing at realism, the means of expression must essentially be understood in symbolic terms. At a time when Hollywood's law of apparent verisimilitude is most stringently in operation, surface reality has been replaced by an entirely symbolic world, America's final fling at a coherent understanding of itself.

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These are prefatory and generalised remarks which I would like to try to justify in part by consideration of a late film by a very underestimated director, Leo McCarey. He has always been seen as a director in an improvised, slapstick tradition — we recall that Sarris sees him 'noted less for his rigorous direction than for his relaxed digressions'. His movie *An Affair to Remember* (1957) is an unashamed remake of his own *Love Affair* (1939), but it strikes one less by any improvised qualities that it might possess (indeed, the one clearly improvised scene, the children song in the class-room is a disaster) than by its extraordinary formal direction. As a great director of actors, McCarey often obtains his effects by the expressions and the gestures of his players: and it makes his mise-en-scene extremely difficult to evaluate in other than completely subjective terms, for where one director might employ a camera movement or a lighting effect to make a point, McCarey will invariably rely on a close-up of the performer. Paradoxically then, *An Affair to Remember* is comprised of an absolutely formal symbolic development which is the key to its mise-en-scene, although McCarey will only see this development as the most inevitable manner of expressing the world in which the love-affair takes place: put more simply, the one is the necessary means of demonstrating the other, bound together in a narrative constantly employed in the moral 'fake' of the contingent now known as the 'illusionist method'. Style then is sublimated in the story of the central characters, ageing playboy Nicky Ferrante, and night-club singer Terry McKay. Two complementary images de-

monstrate this, and they are essential to an understanding of McCarey's method and the melodrama genre. (a) Ferrante and Terry have arranged to give their love a test period of six months, after which they will meet on top of the Empire State Building. Terry is up on the roof of a penthouse, belonging to the man she was previously going to marry: in the glass doorway to the left of the cinema-scope frame, she tells him that she is in love with Ferrante, and then leans back against the door which swings out to reflect the Empire State Building in its frame. (b) In the final scene of the movie, Nicky bursts through a door of Terry's apartment to see a picture that he has painted on the wall: its presence there immediately tells him that Terry only missed their date because she has been physically prevented from keeping it. Nicky is, like Terry, on the left-hand side of the screen, and on the right the picture is seen in the frame of a large mirror. The images are deliberately at crucial moments in the movie, and what is important is the symbolic quality of their framing. For McCarey, the Empire State Building and the painting are not so much real at a primary level, but at a symbolic remove: their importance is as an image, an expression of the central relationship. As symbols, they are themselves testaments to the melodrama's method, as the American Cinema's most intense expression of a reality whose contingencies have been stylised into a rigorous symbolic code whose function is the ultimate elucidation of harmony and coherence.

Naturally, the images represent a culmination of the threads of symbolic action in the movie: *An Affair to Remember* is constructed on two such threads: images of dualism, of the couple, and rhetorically heightened by a doubled process — a dialectic of height and depth. In the first thread, we may count the scene where both Nicky and Terry read letters from their respective fiancées, the formal framing of their unwitting table seating back to back in the ship's restaurant, the scene of the two pink champagnes at the ship's bar, and the two complementary scenes at the grandmother's house, before and after her death. These last scenes are particularly important, the audience doing the work of the director by a kind of dialectic manifested entirely in terms of emotion. In the first scene, when Nicky and Terry visit the former's mother, McCarey's framing is very formal, with characters symmetrically placed on the left, on the right and in the centre on the Cinemascope screen. One time, it is the grandmother in the centre playing the piano with Nicky on the left and Terry on the right, while a second time, Nicky unites the two women at the centre of the frame, as they all have tea together. He returns to the house alone after his grandmother's death, and by repeating the same framing, McCarey wills us to a highly-charged but reflective re-enactment of the previous occasion, instilling the household objects (the piano, the chairs, the painting, the shawl) with a symbolic quality that the structure of the melo-

drama consistently imparts to the reality that it stylises.

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The image of the Empire State Building mentioned above is the culmination of the height-depth dialectic in the movie; throughout *An Affair to Remember*, this dialectic provides the dynamics for the themes. Firstly, we have the notion that Nicky, on his own admittance, places women on an idealistic pedestal and such immaturity is what the trajectory of the film's rhythm will demolish. A first high point of the relationship is up on a forward deck of the ocean liner when the couple read their respective letters: Nicky and Terry are framed with the other passengers on a lower level behind them. Terry's tentative goodbye at this point is indicated by her half-descent on a ladder leading up to the deck level. In the scene of the first kiss, this same descent/ascent is used as the expression of hesitancy: the couple half-descend a ladder, then kiss midway between decks and out of frame, before descending completely. The gesture of Terry's hand on the stair-rail conveys all we need to know about what the kiss symbolises. Similarly the ideal landscape of the grandmother's garden and chapel is high up overlooking the sea, but this idealism and peace is not at that time consonant with the way

the relationship must develop. A ritualistic situation of extremes such as I have mentioned is necessary to test the relationship at a point when it seems to be on the verge of success: such then, is Terry's accident as she goes to keep her date with Nicky, and her own remark on it is integrated into the metaphors of the film's moral — 'I was looking up'. In a neat reversal of the imagery, McCarey makes Nicky's lowest moment in the rhythm of the film the hours he spends on top of the Empire State Building, dejectedly standing to the left of the frame, and isolated from the communal rhythm expressed by the elevator.

Thus, McCarey's intensely formal mise-en-scene: consonant with the ritualistic quality of the melodrama, which has now degenerated into the 'rhythm' of the set-piece in most current Hollywood productions, where a sense of ritual is grafted arbitrarily on any piece of action, regardless of the themes. *An Affair to Remember*, by contrast, is fully representative of the Hollywood melodrama tradition in its simplified depiction of a reality now stripped of genre situations. Hence, the idea of the cliché-image: instead of a formal set of conventions from which to select a means of expression, any aspect of reality has a potentially symbolic character, to be integrated into a condensed

rhythm elaborating the most classic moral trajectory. As ever, the abstractions of Hollywood's major themes are paralleled by intense stylisation — so nature becomes a question of deers and Christmas-trees as in Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, symbols wholly representative of the mainstream American narrative tradition. It is not a question of rejecting the 'ideology' of Hollywood: it is to embrace a rhetoric as a means to an end. Adherence to the form implies belief in the validity of the mechanism of expression, and an acceptance of the essentially primitive quality of this rhetoric is necessary to any appreciation of the Hollywood melodrama. Above all, it is necessary to view these symbols in the context of the emotive rhythm of the films themselves. As Godard said in his celebrated review of Sirk's *A Time to Love and a Time to Die*, 'the important thing... is to believe in what you are doing by making the audience believe in it.'² The melodrama is the cinema of illusion, of emotional manipulation; and as so often, manipulation is the artist's means of revealing truth.

Peter Lloyd

¹ P. Willeman, 'Distanciation and Douglas Sirk', *Screen Summer 1971*, p. 66.
² 'Tears and Speed' — Jean Luc Godard, see *Screen Summer 1971*, p. 97.

An oppressive gift... Nazi hospitality in A Time to Love and a Time to Die



1869-42

**souls made
great by
love and
adversity:
Frank Borzage**

Drawing him back through space...
Trina in *A Man's Castle*



One of the reasons that melodrama — and great film-makers like D W Griffith and Frank Borzage who work its conventions — remains in critical disrepute is that it tends to externalise, to transform, a character's inner conflicts into external events.¹ Nineteenth century melodramatic literature traditionally presents two-dimensional characters, often at the mercy of a hostile environment or an extension of that environment (villain). Though the genre's lack of complexity has a primitive 'purity' to it, it becomes, if handled poorly, its chief drawback and greatest limitation. The best — that of Dickens, Ibsen, Chekhov — makes use of the melodramatic form but avoids its flaws. By adding depth to characterisation through descriptive detail, it steers clear of simplistic externalisations of conflict. Griffith and Borzage, like their literary predecessors, use and believe in the melodrama as a way of seeing the world but also, by shifting their focus from the melodramatic situation itself to the characters in that situation, they gave the form a new dimension; Griffith's and Borzage's wholehearted commitment to a melodramatic world view, apparent in the intensity of feeling behind each shot in their films, invests their work with a transcendent emotional level because it confers upon the characters presented an integrity which is a sign of both innocence and vitality.

What distinguishes Borzage's melodramas from Griffith's is their spirituality. Where Griffith concerns himself primarily, like Dickens, with the restitution of the family unit or the creation of a new family-like unit, Borzage's interests lie chiefly in the salvation of his characters — not with external but internal order.

Where Griffith's characters possess an irrepressible physical vitality — a vitality which makes his films immediate and direct — Borzage's characters radiate from within a unique, spiritual energy that makes them seem luminously unreal.

Yet Borzage's characters also project a captivating but wholly innocent sensuality; they possess a fascinating mixture of spiritual purity and physical attractiveness. Where Griffith tends to evoke either madonna-like innocence (Gish) or wholesome physicality (Dempster), Borzage inextricably combines both these qualities in his characters (Farrell, Gaynor). This sensuality of Borzage's characters is rooted in their Edenic ignorance of the state of sin; it denies an awareness of physical corporeality. In short, Borzage's films concern themselves more with the exploration of the essences behind physical reality: unlike Griffith, he attempts to deal purely with the souls of his characters.

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Borzage himself explains that 'in every face I see I find a story. It doesn't seem hard. The story is right there lying on top, easily visible. You can take it and make something real, vital out of it... By face I don't mean face literally... I mean the characters in my story.'² Borzage's inarticulateness is only verbal. The first few shots of *Street Angel* (1928), perhaps the director's greatest silent film, describe this spirituality — the stories behind faces — far better than words ever could. The first title of the film sets the mood: 'Everywhere... in every town... in every street... we pass, unknowing, human souls made great by love and adversity.' After this remarkably explicit title, Borzage's camera wanders through the crowded streets of Naples, observing policemen making their rounds in the market place, lovers walking arm in arm, a beggar girl sitting desolately at the foot of some stairs, circus gypsies arguing with a sausage vendor. Finally, Borzage cuts to an apartment in which a doctor is telling a girl (Angela) that she must buy some medicine in order to save her sick mother.

Each character we encounter in the opening shots of the film (similar to a later scene in which Gino looks for

Angela in the crowded streets) has some story behind him and each wears that story on his face. By shooting the sequence and directing the actors as he does, Borzage captures the essence of their stories — he penetrates beneath the physical surface of every action, every gesture, and every face. Though all the stories occur independently of one another, Borzage ties them together into a single, spiritual event by use of connective camera movement and editing. This makes no sense logically, as it would in Griffith, but it does work intuitively, to define the limits of the spiritual system that exists in the film. Yet in this and most other Borzage films it is much less rigid and limited than the term 'spiritual system' implies. In fact, the beauty of the opening sequence in *Street Angel* rests on the complexity of characterisation which prevents any inflexible schematization of spiritual values.

Borzage's love relationships in *Street Angel* and other films reveals a highly visual romanticism with roots in the spiritual transparency of his characters, deliberately set off against the sordidness of the social condition. Angela, escaping from the police when arrested for theft while soliciting, runs away with the circus gypsies and eventually meets Gino, an itinerant artist. When they fall in love, Gino paints her portrait. His painting, a fantastic metaphor for the film itself, captures her not as she is, but as he sees her (her soul). In order to eat, they sell the painting to an art dealer. Yet even though it has been sold, the painting and its absence exert a powerful influence on the lovers. When Borzage cuts to shots of the bare wall where the painting was hung, the empty space conveys even more directly the painting's metaphysical significance. Meanwhile, the art dealer, hoping to make a great deal of money on Gino's painting, hires another artist to retouch it and to forge out of it an Old Master. Several times during the film Borzage cuts back

to the painting of Angela: as she herself becomes more and more transformed by her love for Gino, the painting, now depicting a madonna, has also undergone a transformation.

The parallel is both ironic and symbolically true, and when Angela, without Gino's knowledge, is taken back to jail after spending her last hour with him, Borzage cuts to a shot of the forger painting a halo over her head.

Borzage's editing of love sequences, in its total disregard for physical space, goes beyond the surfaces of specific places or actions directly to the spiritual origins of his 'overs' relationships. In his first sound film, *Sound O' My Heart* (1930), the lovers, Sean and Mary, are separated, first by a forced marriage of her to another man and, then, by sheer physical distance. When Sean sings 'The Rose of Tralee' just before he leaves Ireland for a concert tour in the US, Mary, hearing their old love song, is drawn across the village to him and stands in his doorway, listening to him sing. Later, as Sean sings the same song in a New York concert, Borzage cuts back to (the dying) Mary in Ireland looking out of her window at falling leaves and, seemingly, listening to a song that is sung thousands of miles away. Similarly, in *I've Always Loved You* (1946) former lovers Myra Hassman and Leopold Gornoff, her piano teacher, play the same piece of music on the piano at the same moment, though miles apart. By cutting back and forth between the lovers, Borzage creates a strong, spiritual bond between them.

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This spiritual quality of Borzage's love relationships is partly achieved by the narrative backgrounds with which they are contrasted: the hostile environments of war or depression or both appear at the same time as the obstacle to their happiness and the very condition of their love. *Seventh Heaven* (1927), *Farewell to Arms* (1932), *A Man's Castle* (1933), *Little Man, What Now?* (1934), *Three Comrades* (1938), *The Mortal Storm* (1940) and *Till We Meet Again* (1944) all contain hostile backgrounds which Borzage's central characters ultimately transcend. Yet the often-chaotic worlds which surround these characters are no more 'real' in a physical sense than the characters themselves are. In other words, the backgrounds do not impose real or physical danger on the central characters; the chaos of the backgrounds is not a physical but a spiritual one. In *Farewell to Arms* when Lieut. Frederick Henry, deserting the Italian army (including his cynical friend, Major Rinaldi, and what Rinaldi represents), goes back to search for Catherine Barkley, his lover, Borzage surrounds him with scenes of death, destruction, explosions, and horrible human misery in the ranks of the wounded and retreating soldiers. Lt. Henry's search for Catherine, set in the midst of all this spiritual bleakness, becomes a metaphorical journey and, because of the strength and explicitness of its images, the sequence emerges as one of the most powerful direct thematic

statements in the film.

The background of *Little Man, What Now?*, set in the post-war depression of '20s Germany, is filled with voices crying out in the streets — voices like that of the speaker in the park who preaches equality in the film's rain-drenched opening sequence, or cynics like the communist who blames 'them' for the death of his wife, or emotionally twisted characters like the grotesque Kleinholz family or the crazy relationship between Mia Pinnenberg and her dog. It is the spiritual message of these voices that threatens Hans Pinnenberg, not the physical fact of economic depression. Only the innocence and purity of his relationship with Lammchen — symbolised in part by the birth of their child at the end of the film — enables Hans to escape the human wasteland that surrounds him. *A Man's Castle* is played against the background of the American Depression — yet Borzage sees that Depression in terms of its spiritual, not economic chaos. As a result, Bill's aimlessness, represented by his attraction to the sound of the train whistle, and the cynical assurance in his seeming self-sufficiency and independence — an aspect of his character reflected in the self-centred grotesqueness of his promotional costumes (he becomes a walking neon sign, a clown on stilts) — endanger the purity of his relationship with Trina. Even the grim background of war in *The Mortal Storm* or *Till We Meet Again* is less materially hostile than spiritually suffocating to Borzage's characters. In *The Mortal Storm*, set in pre-Nazi Germany, fascism becomes an insane social-political backdrop to Borzage's family melodrama: a family fights against an externalised system of evil which threatens to destroy its cohesiveness. On one level, the film works as allegory — Borzage treats the disintegration of the Roth family as a microcosm for the greater collapse of the state and the world. Yet Borzage's handling of the narrative material is less political than moral and spiritual.⁴ When Professor Roth's stepsons, Otto and Erich, and his best student, Fritz (also his daughter's fiancé and, as such, would-be member of the family), reveal their conversion to fascism at the professor's birthday party, their betrayal emerges as a betrayal of a system of general, spiritual values more than of a specific political or religious belief.⁵ Borzage's editing here, first isolating, then grouping various characters together according to their beliefs, transforms the family from one based originally on ties of blood to one based on a more abstract, yet stronger bond of mutuality and affinity of spirit.

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As the family seems to crumble around the professor, what emerges is a new alliance of souls: Freya, becoming more and more disillusioned with Fritz's gradual Nazification, grows closer to Martin, another of her father's students. Borzage's alignment of characters according to spiritual affinity creates two distinct outlooks in the film. Though one seems to overwhelm the other — the professor dies in a concentration camp, Mrs. Roth

and her youngest son go to Switzerland, Freya tries to escape from Germany with Martin but is shot by Fritz and dies in Martin's arms on the Swiss border — the grotesque brutality and barbaric consequences of that outlook take their toll on those who try to adhere to it. In the last few shots of the film, Borzage reaffirms the transcendence of the professor's vision. Otto and Erich visit their now-deserted home. Fritz enters and tells them of Freya's death. After Fritz has gone, they argue about what has happened to their family and Erich, the more dogmatic Nazi, also leaves. Otto, transformed by what he has learned, walks about the empty house; Borzage's tracking camera shows us what he sees and suggests what he remembers. Then, when Otto also departs, the camera, after a moment or two, follows him outside and tracks down the Roth's walk to their gate, focusing on Otto's footprints in the snow as they slowly fill in with new-fallen snow before our eyes.

The power and beauty of this ending, like that of *Farewell To Arms* in which Lt. Henry holds his dead 'wife' in his arms as peace is announced (Borzage cuts to a shot of pigeons flying), lies in the complexity of feelings it evokes. The disillusionment of Otto with the rigid Nazi dogma that has destroyed his family suggests his conversion to a new awareness. Yet the cost at which this conversion comes, the loss of all that once had meaning for him, qualifies his transformation.

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In *Till We Meet Again*, Sister Clothilde's fear of the outside world, brilliantly visualised in her attempts to shut out — through prayer — the gunshots she hears in the film's first sequence, defines that world in terms of its spiritual threat to her. Though Clothilde tries melodramatically to externalise the forces of evil and to locate them solely in the outside world, Borzage, going beyond the limited vision of any one of his characters, under-

Angela's portrait in *Street Angel*



cuts the novice's self-confidence and untested surety in her faith by using that world to make trial of her spirituality. For Borzage, Clothilde's cloistered saintliness gives her spiritual aspirations no meaning because she has only escaped not transcended the outside world. Her contact with that world, with the aviator and his system of values in particular, deepens her faith and leads her to a more profound understanding of what religion really is. Her crucifixion at the end of the film, representing conversion to a more complex spirituality, marks her transcendence of both the outside world and the cloister. In *Till We Meet Again*, as in other films, Borzage is rarely specific. If the film contains a conversion to a spiritual system, that system is defined more by its flexibility than its orthodoxy. Borzage's characters' transcendence, as a result, is the more moving because they attain a state that is not restricted, defined or limited by dogmatic ideas or set beliefs.

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In *Mannequin* (1937), the tangible reality of a light bulb on Jessie's tenement stairway is less important than the intangible flickering it emits. Though the source of the light is shown and the heroine can temporarily correct its malfunctioning, the light becomes, like the sound of the train whistle in *A Man's Castle*, an intangible force that cannot be dealt with physically: later that night the light flickers again and finally goes out, trapping Jessie in the darkness. Light is part of a physical environment (Hester St) that she is trying to escape: Borzage treats it as a visual metaphor of her spiritual state and of the spiritual atmosphere which surrounds her.

In a way, Borzage's visual style reflects his belief in the immateriality of objects and characters. His images have little to do with real things; rather, like Plato's ideal forms, they refer to an absolute and

eternal reality that exists on a purely abstract level. In other words, his images often function as metaphors, revealing his concern for larger, transcendent issues. In *Strange Cargo* (1940), Cambreau, who exerts a strange spiritual influence in the film, draws a map of an escape route from the island's prison in a Bible and leaves it behind for Vern to use when he escapes and follows him and the other prisoners. Though Borzage only cuts to the Bible map once, the image becomes one of the most powerful ones in the film, representing, as it does, the symbolic implications of the prisoners' escape/journey. The explicitness of this brief image, consistent with the explicitness of the film as a whole, illustrates the depth of Borzage's commitment to the metaphorical aspects of his story.

In *The River* (1928) Borzage presents Rosalee, waiting for the return of her convict-lover Marsdon, sitting disconsolately on the river's edge with the crow that Marsdon left her. Borzage intercuts shots of flotsam and debris, caught in the river's current, which disappears into a whirlpool. Reflecting her mood and state of mind, the river and its contents become a metaphor for Rosalee's despair. The appearance of Allen John among the drifting wreckage, since it initially suggests an identification of him with her gloom, ties the two together into a single state of consciousness which, through Allen John's purity and his subsequent efforts to evoke emotion in Rosalee, gradually evolves into a positive, therapeutic relationship that redeems Rosalee from her despondency.

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In visual terms, Borzage's backgrounds, like his tonal environments, have a spiritual rather than material quality. In most of his films, he uses studio sets and, as a result, his backgrounds have an unreal, fairy-tale quality. Part of this

has to do with the way Borzage lights them — the tones of his backgrounds, often as light as or lighter than his characters' faces, give his frames a weightless quality. Borzage's lighting, like Griffith's, is even throughout the frame, i.e. each part of the frame seems equally and evenly lit. Yet Borzage's lighting is softer than Griffith's and his frames lack Griffith's precision and tremendous resolution in depth. What is important about Borzage's lighting is that it creates an evenness of tone within the frame: though the background and foreground are weightless, they are equally weightless. As a result of this evenness specific objects or backgrounds never exert specific physical force on his characters. The stove in *A Man's Castle* and the mirror-dresser in *Little Man, What Now?*, for example, have a force over Borzage's characters which goes beyond their material existence or function. The relationship of characters to objects or to their backgrounds, because of this evenness of tone do not work out in spatial terms (e.g. conflict between foreground and background or between characters and their environment). The flatness of Borzage's backgrounds and their tendency to fall out of focus in medium shot and close-up do not, as they do in, say, Cukors' films, separate characters by dividing the frame into two planes of depth. Instead, Borzage's lighting unifies his frames into a single level of depth, and characters do not derive their spirituality from specific objects or from specific parts of the frame (as in Griffith) but from the tonal quality of the whole frame and the succession of frames around it (i.e. from the editing).

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Unlike Hawks, Borzage is not a visual materialist. At the beginning of *Three Comrades*, after the toast to the 'comrades living and dead of all men', Borzage introduces his central characters. When one of them, Otto Koster, learns that, because of the armistice, his plane is to be dismantled, he leaves the group and goes outside. Outside, Borzage tracks in on Koster as he approaches his plane. He cuts to an insert shot of a medallion with 'Baby' written on it, cuts back to the original set-up as Koster takes the pin out of a grenade, drops it into the plane's cockpit and walks away. Then Borzage cuts back to a shot which tracks away from the plane and from Koster. The camera tracks back until the grenade explodes; then it tracks in again on the burning plane.

What makes the scene so emphatic is that its force hinges on the tracking camera which pulls away from the plane. For me, the tracking shot seems to deny the plane's physical reality, because although Koster destroys his airplane, it's clear that whatever 'Baby' is will live on after the demise of its physical reality. In fact, we later see an insert shot of the same medallion on Koster's car which he also sacrifices to achieve a spiritual goal — to pay for the operation of his friend's wife. The scene epitomizes the whole film: characters give objects and one another, through friendship and love,

a life of their own which transcends material existence. Both objects and characters attain an 'eternal' reality — something impervious to time and space, to death or physical separation.

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There's a sequence in *A Man's Castle* in which Bill, afraid of becoming trapped by Trina's love, leaves her. The scene begins with a two-shot close-up of them together. Bill slowly draws out of the frame, leaving Trina alone on the bed. A train whistle is heard on the soundtrack. After a few moments, Borzage cuts to Bill hopping a freight. Then he begins to cross-cut — back to Trina, then to Bill. The shots of Trina are tremendously powerful — partly because of her angled position in the frame, as if her image were drawing him back through space. Bill first looks back and then jumps off the train to return to her. The cross-cuts here, somewhat like Griffith's in *Intolerance* or *Way Down East*, go beyond the mere mechanic of suspense: implying an ultimate rescue, they have the force of salvation and exert a mysterious power.

In Borzage's films, as suggested above, the space between characters — even in a single frame — has no deterministic force. Where Welles, in the famous breakfast-table time montage in *Citizen Kane*, or the stairway sequences in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, shows the separation of his characters in geographically physical terms — in fact, the space between characters becomes a character itself — Borzage has an altogether non-physical conception of time and space. The split-screen phone conversations in *Three Comrades* reflect this: a character in one spatial matrix can communicate with another in another spatial matrix. The use of the split-screen foreshadows a sort of relationship, like that in *A Man's Castle* or *I've Always Loved You*, that can transcend space. For this reason, the physical separation of the lovers throughout *Three Comrades* is immensely important to the development of the spirituality of their relationship. Like Koster's plane, it can be seen as another physical reality that Borzage's visual style destroys and transcends. As a result, the dissolve from Pat and the Christmas tree in the mountain sanatorium to Erich and the Christmas tree in Alphons' cafe, like that from Mrs Dexter's radio to Dean Harcourt's church in *Green Light*, transcends space by suggesting a far greater, spiritual reality that overshadows and encompasses every action in Borzage's universe.

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The shooting of *Three Comrades*, like that of Borzage's other '30s work has a strange, almost mysterious quality to it, as if he were trying to capture in his images the intangible forces that surround his characters. One sequence in particular — the time montage that announces the changing of the seasons — illustrates how far he is prepared to go in his 'romanticised' view of the universe. Midway through the film, Borzage cuts to shots of the wind blowing through the trees and through the city streets when winter comes. He transforms time into an

almost mystical force that floats his cork-like characters along, much as the unseen wind does the newspaper in the streets. At times, his shooting seems to epitomise the emotional state of his characters at specific moments in time. On Erich and Pat's honeymoon, Borzage's long, high-angle shot of Erich carrying Pat along the shore back to their hotel after her sudden collapse seems to transform them, to bring out their inward state and feelings and project them upon the landscape.

At the end of *Three Comrades*, almost every shot serves to capture this essence. The breathtakingly beautiful crane-shot as Pat gets up out of bed after her operation and goes to her balcony to see Erich and Koster for the last time suggests, as does the overhead shooting at the end of *Seventh Heaven* and *Till We Meet Again*, a supernatural presence which oversees her ultimate transcendence of the final physical barrier which separates her from Erich: her body.

Borzage's ending of *Three Comrades*, which differs from Fitzgerald's (his screenwriter), takes place in a cemetery outside of the city and shows the three comrades and Pat reunited — a realisation of the film's first lines that toasted 'the comrades living and dead of all men'. In the last shot, Erich and Koster (surrounded by the ethereal images of Pat and Gottfried) leave the cemetery and talk of going to South America.⁶ Like the characters at the end of *A Man's Castle* escaping on the train together or of *Little Man What Now?* with the prospect of a better life in Holland, the characters in *Three Comrades* do not run away from their chaotic, troubled backgrounds as much as they grow out of them spiritually. Borzage so totally transforms them that it becomes impossible for them to go back, as Fitzgerald wanted. Erich and Koster, like Pat and Gottfried, are ultimately liberated from the weight of their own

bodies and chaotic backgrounds that threaten to entrap them.

*

In conclusion, what makes Borzage's melodramas unique is the director's avoidance of extreme conflicts: neither his characters nor their environment struggle mortally with one another. Rather than externalising his plots into moral contests between good and evil in which characters defeat or are defeated by the evil that engulfs them, Borzage, diffusing the conventional melodramatic moral polarity, permits the co-existence of several moral and spiritual systems in his films. He merely makes trial of one by juxtaposing it to another, providing the catalyst for his characters' growth out of one system and emergence into another, more transcendent one. The tolerated presence of inferior spiritual systems in his films only heightens the beauty and integrity of the superior one. For Borzage, it is only through love and adversity that souls are made great.

John Belton

¹ Corrigan, Robert W., ed., *Laurel British Drama: The Nineteenth Century*, New York, Dell Publishing Co., 1967, pp. 7-8.

² Milne, Peter, *Motion Picture Directing*, 'Some Words From Frank Borzage', New York, Falk Publishing Co., 1922.

³ The insanity of the Nazis is suggested most vividly in their secret meetings and in the terrifying book-burning sequence outside the professor's university window.

⁴ The film's success upon its release in 1940 rests largely on its political importance as one of the first anti-Nazi Hollywood films. Most contemporary reviews discuss it only on those terms. The author of the book on which the film was based even wrote a political analysis of the film for *The New York Times* (6/16/40).

⁵ Indeed, Borzage makes very little of Roth's Jewishness. His specific religion is less important than his overall spiritual outlook.

⁶ In *Crazy Sundays*, Aaron Latham anecdotally discusses F. Scott Fitzgerald's contribution to the film's present ending as escapism. The idea which Fitzgerald wanted to close with was that of 'the march of four people living and dead, heroic and unconquerable, side by side back into the fight'. *Crazy Sundays*, The Viking Press, New York, 1970, pp. 144-145.

Nevermore... Rosalee and the coin in *The River*



...but from the debris and flotsam emerges Allen John

Seventh Heaven

It has been claimed that melodrama is characteristic of an alienated society which is unaware of class struggles. In *Seventh Heaven* Chico (Charles Farrell) is certainly alienated, but his strong sense of, and respect for, social structures is described in terms which imply that society is not as well organised as he thinks. He works in the sewers of Paris and hopes literally to move up in the world (ie above ground) and become a street sweeper. Besides, the setting of the film transcends the architecture of society, since Chico lives in an attic, a 'seventh heaven' from which he can dominate Paris and where he will find love with Diane.

At the beginning of the film Diane (Janet Gaynor) and her sister receive the visit of very wealthy relatives who refuse to help the girls when they understand that they are semi-prostitutes. The scene does not appear in the 1937 remake (by Henry King), which profoundly modifies the social implications of the story. For the relatives are accompanied by a certain Colonel Brissac (Ben Bard) who turns up again later when, during the war, Chico is at the front and Diane working in a munitions factory. It appears that Brissac, safely posted in Paris, tries to seduce Diane, urging her not to care about 'the old rules', that is to say, loyalty. Such social comment is not uncommon in Borzage's work, and in a later film of his (*Moonrise*, 1948), society will stand accused for having assumed that a murderer's son was himself a murderer, thereby making him into one.

*

Religion plays an explicit part in *Seventh Heaven* as in a number of Borzage's films, for instance *Disputed Passage* (1939), *Strange Cargo* (1940), *The Big Fisherman* (1959). At first Chico prides himself on being an atheist. He begins to be gradually converted when the priest (Emile Chautard, of Sternberg fame) shows him that God pays his debts after all, and promotes him to street sweeper. Being suddenly called up (the time is 1914), there is no time for a church wedding, and he accepts to be married to Diane symbolically by exchanging religious medals. At the front he dies in the same priest's arms and asks him to return his medal to Diane. The end of the film is a succession of sudden reversals. First, when Diane hears that Chico has died, she professes not to believe in God any more. Then, miraculously Chico appears; he had not been killed, it seems, but only blinded, and now that he is blind, he can see the truth and believes in God. Both these sudden reversals and the ambiguous character of the ending as a whole serve to underline the important role of religion in the film, but at the same time its limits.

Chico and Diane marry without the intervention of the established Church, and throughout the war they remain in telepathic contact. Every day at 11am they exchange the formula 'Chico-Diane-Heaven'. Ultimately, the direct communication between two individuals, with only an indirect reference to religion, is seen as more important than any overtly religious bond. Their Heaven is of their own making rather than one opened to them by Divine Providence. (Again, in the remake, the attitude towards religion is more conventional, which is one of the reasons why King's film paradoxically looks more dated than Borzage's.)



The two sisters

Common sense generally regards the letter (the symbol) less important than the spirit (the substance). The letter is seen as an impoverishment of the spirit. In melodrama, this relationship is of a more fundamental nature. The letter is an intimation of the spirit, and the original unity of letter and spirit is reinstated. To enact the words and gestures of a ritual, to achieve what is normally derided as 'make-believe' or 'symbolic gratification', in melodrama often comes to express the spirit better than the conventional 'real thing'. The phenomenon might be described as evoking 'the spirit of the letter' through 'the letter of the spirit'. In *Seventh Heaven*, Chico rescues Diane first from her sister and then from herself (she tries to commit suicide). But the sister wants to take revenge by making sure that Diane is rounded up by the police. Chico steps forward and states categorically: 'She's my wife'. Because he has said so, the words (the letter)

Seventh Heaven USA 1927 Dir Frank Borzage Sc Benjamin Glazer, based on the play by Austin Strong and John Golden Phot Ernest Palmer Cast Janet Gaynor (Diane) Charles Farrell (Chico) Ben Bard (Colonel Brissac) Emile Chautard (Father Chevilion) Prod Fox

will become true (the spirit), they are already true even though he himself is unaware of this. Melodramatic characters often express similarly binding oracles. Chico and Diane have to live together for a few days because of the police's threat to check on them. This is the occasion for their having breakfast together, another indication that they are man and wife according to the 'spirit' because they are already man and wife according to a ritualistic 'letter'. (Cf. similar scenes in Capra's *It Happened One Night* or in Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives*.) When they actually marry each other with Chico's medals, Diane prays 'that this be a true marriage'. Going through the letter of the ritual ensures that the spirit is also present. In Wellman's *Lafayette Escadrille*, Tab Hunter and Etchika Choureaux marry in a comparable way, by using the girl's earrings as a pledge.

A consequence of the relation between the letter and the spirit is that inanimate objects can play as important a function in melodrama as they do in fairy tales. Contrary to appearances, when such an inanimate object has a human being's name, it is also endowed with a soul. Thus in *Seventh Heaven* we witness the heroic death of Eloise (a taxicab) at the Battle of the Marne. In *Moonrise* Rex Ingram does not distinguish between human beings, 'Mr Dog' and 'Mr Guitar'.

These remarks bear on the ending as well, because it becomes clear that, when the characters refer to 'Heaven', this is meant in more than one sense. In other words, what in Borzage's melodramas appears to be symbolic may well be true, what appears to be real may well be symbolic. 'Heaven' is a figure of speech, but also a hereafter, whilst at the same time the Parisian attic which the phrase seems to designate is more an imaginary projection than a 'real' setting. Or, to put it in very stark terms, the symbol is true, whereas realism is 'only' symbolic.

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After years of war we see Chico in a trench, wounded by flame-throwers. Because he cannot read his watch, he is unable to keep his daily telepathic date with Diane at 11am. We then see him die in the priest's arms. Diane's sorrow when she hears the news is set in sharp contrast with the rejoicing of Armistice Day. A traditional motif, the exuberant joy of a crowd is used as a foil for individual tragedy (cf the fun fair in Minnelli's *Some Came Running* or again in Borzage's *Moonrise*). When Chico suddenly appears, blind but alive, making his way through the crowd, walking up the spiral staircase to his 'Seventh Heaven' and arriving in the attic at 11am, he states very forcibly: 'I'll never die' and 'Nothing

can keep Chico blind for long'. At the end of the film, supernatural sunshine suffuses the attic and achieves a transfiguration of the picturesque setting. Thus the impression is of Death and Transfiguration. After all, Chico has actually died before our very eyes, it is not as if there had been an ellipsis in the narrative (which is the case in the remake). Also, his claims are so exaggerated (never, nothing) that the effect is one of truth on a symbolic level, not on a realistic level. What can be argued is that such a symbolic level is also the realm of religion, that their Heaven has become the Christian Paradise. Yet this is not completely convincing, because, as already pointed out, the characters have previously expressed attitudes, and behaved in a way that revealed a certain diffidence towards established forms of religion. If we accept the idea that the happy ending is symbolic rather than realistic, we are then left with the reality of Chico's death and with Diane's faith consequently shattered.

Thus the ending of *Seventh Heaven* does not conflict with the sense of tragedy which is so apparent in other Borzage films. (See the death of children in *Secrets*, *No Greater Glory*, *Magnificent Doll*; the hanging scenes of *Secrets* and *Moonrise*; etc). Rather, it is another example of the recourse to the dream world of a personal hereafter.

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What remains to be discussed is why the film is so effective, how its themes and structures are actually expressed by the stylistic devices of acting, lighting, setting, etc. For example, the opening scenes introduce the viewer to Paris in 1914, with the realistic picturesque touches of a gaslight or of customers playing dominoes in a café. Particularly moving is the idyll between Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell, which takes place in the *Seventh Heaven* of the title. From their window, they can see both Sacré-Coeur and the Eiffel Tower, as well as the stars. The attic at once expresses Chico's (symbolic/real) elevation above his social condition and it proves a means of redemption for Diane. Conventional syntax is inverted as we watch the characters actually fall in love after they have gone through the everyday gestures of living together, rather than the other way round, as in the case of a ready-made romance or honeymoon. Borzage's eroticism is discreet, but effective, as one sees Janet Gaynor undress and show her naked legs. At first, this might seem surprising, considering the date of the film, but similarly frank eroticism is to be found in Borzage's *The River* (1928) or in De Mille's *The Squawman* (1931). On the other hand, by 1937 it was no longer deemed possible to be so open about sexual charm.

When Chico and Diane are reunited, he being blind and still wearing his uniform, Diane's dress as she embraces him is so white that they look like one of those turn-of-the-century statues where a knight in armour clasps a seemingly naked woman. Throughout the film, lighting is used to idealise Janet Gaynor, the light is reflected on her hair and surrounds her

face with a supernatural halo, just as in *Secrets* Mary Pickford's face is surrounded by sacred flames when she loses her child.

Borzage's attention to apparently unimportant details has been noted by fellow-director Jean Negulesco in the following, rather uncomprehending, terms: 'Borzage was a strange man. He'd have a scene with, say, three hundred extras, and all he'd be interested in was the way water would drip from a leaf and the way you'd see Gary Cooper passing by through this dripping water in the big retreat from Caporetto.*' In *Seventh Heaven* the realistic detail of Chico's long belt is turned to lyrical effect when he spins on himself very quickly to put it on, and the movement ends with his 'accidentally' embracing Diane. Later Diane is mending his jacket while he is at work, and Borzage shows her tentatively putting the jacket's sleeves around herself, a motif also used by Busby Berkeley in the ballet of the washerwomen, and in Minnelli's early



Charles Farrell

musical *Cabin in the Sky*. (This of course provides another example of the magic character of 'inanimate' objects.)

Other visual inventions include the re-enactment of the German advance on Paris in the fall of 1914: a soldier uses a sausage to designate the German army and lumps of sugar for the French positions. The war scenes that follow (the Battle of the Marne) are remarkable for their portrayal of the taxicabs and of the battle itself, with a scene shot from behind a glass pane. They are developed in a way that makes the melodrama carry one into the war setting visually as well as in terms of plot and situation. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that Borzage is also the director of *A Farewell to Arms* and of *No Greater Glory*. (In particular, a scene from *Seventh Heaven*, with children hailing the soldiers who leave for the front, points forward to the latter film.)

Throughout the film, which has no dia-

logue but background music and choirs off, programmatic music is used to express the conflict between the historical theme (military marches, la Marseillaise, la Madelon...) and the individual love theme ('Diane'). The theme song became very popular, and Charles Farrell and Janet Gaynor were to star together in several musicals, mostly under David Butler's direction. Such use of music is very characteristic of both melodrama in general and of Borzage films. In an operative way, a theme signifies the characters' plight. The lifelong love affair of Mary Pickford and Leslie Howard in *Secrets* is expressed by the song 'O Susanna' which transcends the march of time (it is heard as they travel in a wagon at the beginning of their marriage and again as they leave by car at the end of their life). In *Mannequin*, the song which at first is the emblem of Joan Crawford's love for Alan Curtis becomes, unchanged, the emblem of her romance with Spencer Tracy. *Moonrise* is also the name of a



Janet Gaynor

song, and Rex Ingram plays a song on the guitar to warn the hero of his tragic fate.

In 1927 — the year of Borzage's *Seventh Heaven* — Janet Gaynor also starred in Murnau's *Sunrise*, and (again with Charles Farrell) in Borzage's *Street Angel*. Both players were reunited under Borzage's direction in *Lucky Star* (1929); Charles Farrell appeared without Janet Gaynor in *The River* (1928) and *Liliom* (1930), both by Borzage. The remake of *Seventh Heaven* is incidentally above much of King's work, probably due in large measure to the original, but credit should also be given to its interpreters, James Stewart and Simone Simon, and to a strong supporting cast, which make it not altogether unworthy of Borzage's romantic achievement.

Jean-Loup Bourget

* See Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, *The Celluloid Muse* (Hollywood Directors Speak). Angus and Robertson, London, 1969.

Klute



Donald Sutherland: an unlikely Orpheus...

Pakula has come to be a director after twenty years or so in the film industry, and to judge from *Klute* the long delay looks like a source of strength, for he pursues his particular psychological interest (significantly he once wanted to train as a psycho-analyst) within an established genre framework, and in so doing achieves a masterly reworking, and revitalization, of the 'private eye' thriller. John Klute, like his Hammett and Chandler forbears, completes his assignment, solves the crime and gets the girl; but where the detective is a short-haired, clean-living provincial confronting the sin and glitter of New York, where his employer is the criminal to be unmasked, and where the girl is both victim and exploiter in an atomized urban society, a prostitute addicted to role-playing as an escape from feeling, the assignment soon reveals itself to be a quest for the truth of something more than a particular 'missing persons' case. Descending into the lower depths of the great city, Pakula's detective journeys towards the heart of a darkness both psychological and social, the darkness of a civilization that knows only extremes, that offers only brutal alternatives — opulence or squalor, repression or indulgence, oppression or prostitution. In this world of unmediated opposites Klute moves as a mediator, suggesting, however tentatively, the existence of other possibilities, other ways of living, and performing in the end an act of human salvage, if not salvation.

The film opens with an image of plenitude and contentment — a dinner-party in a prosperous middle-class home, with a glimpse of garden through the window indicating rural, or at least sub-

urban, peace. Cut to an image of absence and distress — the empty chair at the head of the table, the table bare and the guests departed. The onetime host, Grunneman, is missing, suspected of being a psychopath who relieves his sadistic impulses on New York prostitutes. John Klute, a friend of the family, volunteers to look for him with the backing of Cable, the managing director of Grunneman's firm. But the search for the missing man becomes a search for his murderer, the psychopath; and this, in turn, involves the rescue and regeneration of his one surviving victim, the prostitute Bree Daniels. The film turns in a circle; the murderer is identical with the man who instigated the inquiry, Cable, while Grunneman's empty chair of the opening sequence is echoed in the final shot of Bree's empty room as she is about to leave with Klute. One image of emptiness calls forth another, but the emotional and moral significance is reversed: the loss of Grunneman is the saving of Bree; the emptiness that spells death in the pastoral world, bears the promise of new life in an urban world where abundance is synonymous with chaos.

This combination of parallel and contrast is a fundamental feature of the film and provides a key to the nature of Pakula's vision. The orderly bareness of Klute's basement hide-out is mirrored in the asepetic order of Cable's skyscraper office, his impassive countenance in Cable's; his descent from the roof of Bree's apartment to the cellar in pursuit of the prowling psychopath foreshadows Cable's plunging glance from his Manhattan eyrie and his final fall. Similarly, the acting and model-

Klute USA 1971 **Dir** and **Pr** Alan Pakula
Sc Andy K and Dave Lewis **Phot** Gordon Willis **Mus** Michael Small **Cast** Jane Fonda (Bree Daniels) Donald Sutherland (John Klute) Charles Cioffi (Cable) Roy Schneider (Frank Ligourin) **Prod** Warner (114 min)

ling for which Bree auditions without success are presented as parallels to her actual profession, simply different forms of prostitution. And yet there is still a marked contrast in moral terms between Klute's life and Cable's, between the act Bree puts on as a call-girl and her attempt to act the part of St Joan. Pakula's parallels are not the simple equations of a pessimism, or cynicism, that sees all human actions as indistinguishably corrupt. The parallels between Klute and Cable do more than merely suggest that all men are brothers in depravity; they are made to emphasize the different moral options open to men exposed to the same conditions. The vertical plane in which Pakula's camera repeatedly moves — following the upward or downward movement of a lift, tracing the soaring flight of a helicopter, craning down into the sombre canyons of Manhattan — indicates the moral scale on which the lives of his characters are plotted: they may rise or they may fall, there is hope as well as despair, the likelihood of damnation is countered by the possibility of salvation.

The emphasis on vertical movement and rhythm of rise and fall hint at a mythical dimension to Klute's assignment. His is a journey from the secular paradise of a peaceful rural world into the hell of the modern metropolis. He descends into his underworld to find not monsters but simply people, like the quiet pot-smoking party he stumbles on in the cellar beneath Bree's apartment when he thinks he is homing in on the psychopath. An inferno the city may be, but there is no autonomous force of evil here, only different forms of human life and suffering; and in coming to appreciate this, the detective, it is suggested, undergoes an education in human sympathy.

At first Klute, the provincial and probably puritan *ingénu*, remains resolutely unimpressed by the apparent glamour of New York, his impassive face serving as a blank screen on which are projected the sad perversions, strident temptations and wryly comic absurdities of commercialized sex. But hard-faced detachment is only another variation of the common sickness, the common emotional paralysis, and if Klute does prove to be something of a hero, then his heroism consists not so much in the traditional cool and muscular resilience of the private-eye as in the capacity for feeling that he gradually comes to reveal. His seduction by the prostitute Bree is perhaps the first crucial stage in this process, putting an end to his outsider's contempt for the life of the city and 'corrupting' him into the stream of common humanity. The positive moral significance of an event which is, in the first place, simply a snub to his superiority meted out with the skill of a professional, emerges clearly, and perhaps too clearly, from the subsequent

scene in the street-market. Here Klute's cool detachment has yielded to natural warmth, and he becomes the smiling accomplice to Bree's petty theft of a forbidden fruit. The camera tracks back to show them in distant profile walking home, Klute playing Orpheus to Bree's Eurydice, leading the way as she follows trustingly behind holding on to his jacket. Then he turns to look at her, puts his arm around her and they continue together. The puritan moralist has yielded to the old, but human, Adam; and this is his, and the girl's salvation. This tight-lipped Orpheus is only finally able to lead his Eurydice out of the metropolitan Hades because he does turn his head from the strict line of assigned duty, because he proves to be more of a man than a machine.

There are other points at which Klute's capacity for feeling can be seen to unfold, points through which one can plot the curve of his inner development (Pakula is not concerned with showing that curve in detail since Bree's inner pilgrimage is the main focus of the narrative). When he comes to walk among the lowest of the dead, the heroin addicts of the lower East Side, he is moved at least enough by one man's grief at the death of his girl to give him money for a fix. Once again, to show simple decency is to collude in some way with corruption; and when Klute later meets Cable at the helicopter station, knowing by now for certain that he is the killer, there is a similar sense of identification with fallen humanity. As the helicopter takes off with Cable's face staring down darkly from inside, Klute stands faced by his own reflection in a window. In Cable he has seen his own potential self; in unmasking Cable he has attained a new degree of self-understanding. And this laconic image of sympathy rather than revulsion marks the climax of Klute's investigation.

In spite of the title, however, the girl rather than the detective is the focal point of the film, her condition and her trade being most fully indicative of the nature of life and the nature of relationships in this particular social environment. She lives alone, preying on the desires and weaknesses of others, and being preyed upon in her turn. The room she lives in is a central image of isolation, combining with similar images — Klute's basement, Cable's eyrie, recurrent shots of lift-cages — to suggest a world composed of separate and untouching atoms of human existence. The room, like her emotional isolation, is both womb and prison, refuge and trap; it represents privacy but also loneliness; it is the place she retreats to after her sexual forays into the world for money, but it is also the place where she can be hunted down by the nocturnal prowler on the roof and the silent caller. The ambivalent nature of the room is reflected in the function of the telephone (and the same applies to the tape-recorder which portentously accompanies the credits). In this atomized world technology replaces the missing human bonds between people, and the telephone assumes crucial importance as a life-line on the one hand, and as an instrument of violation on the other. It is

Bree's principal means of contact with the outside world, the means by which her clients can reach her, but at the same time the means by which she can be threatened and her privacy violated. It marks both her isolation and the whole web of warped relationships in which she is entangled: she can use the phone to manipulate others or she can be manipulated by it, and between these extremes there seems to lie no other possibility, until Klute arrives to suggest, at least potentially, a relationship in which neither manipulation nor technology has a necessary place.

Klute's intrusion is, of course, another form of violation, but like her seduction of him, its consequences are salutary, since it finally breaks the circle of prostitution and exploitation and restores to the girl her power of feeling, her ability to love. More than anything else the film is the story of that restoration, the case-history of a person suffering from a form of psychological and emotional sclerosis that eventually responds to the shock treatment of human contact. A confessional thread runs through the sequence of dramatic events: at frequent intervals Bree is shown, or heard, describing her condition to an analyst and commenting on her changing feelings for Klute as she is gradually weaned away from the prostitution that had become a compulsive means of achieving temporary identity and security through skillfully playing a role, through the actress' suspension of feeling. Watching Bree's confession or her role-playing, we, the audience, feel ourselves placed in the position of a voyeur; there is a clear sense of eavesdropping, or key-hole spying, as we witness the patient confiding to the analyst or the call-girl at intimate work with a client. Like Klute we are outside observers, made to feel our distance from these scenes of private life. But as the narrative proceeds the confessional element is subordinated to the dramatic, the case-history comes alive, and the observer's distance yields to palpable involve-

...to Jane Fonda's Eurydice



ment, paralleling Bree's own development. The climax of our involvement, and hers, is her confrontation with Cable in the garment-manufacturers' deserted office where the full destructive effect of her exploitation of men's weaknesses is finally revealed. In preying upon the dark corners of Cable's psyche, she has helped turn him into a murderer, and the realization of this comes upon her with the force of the knowledge that she is to be his next victim — while we suffer sympathetically with suspense. As she is forced to listen to a recording of Cable's preceding murder, the hard-bitten facade of the cool actress flakes away in tears. Whether the tears stem from self-pity or remorse is immaterial; the fact that they flow at all is enough to herald her rebirth. The tape-recorder has played its final role of violation, this time to a positive end.

The room is not only an image of atomized existence, it also functions as a barometer of Bree's inner development: on it and through it are projected the strains and the crises of her psychological regeneration. If any evidence were needed of the cinema's affinity to the nineteenth-century realistic novel, then little could be more telling than the way in which character and milieu are here so closely related that the tidiness or untidiness of a room can express the calm or confusion of a human soul. Klute's gradual intrusion into the girl's life is marked by a growing orderliness in the room in which she lives. When it is ransacked by the unknown psychopath, we are made aware of the turmoil in her life and mind, caused not only by her persecutor but also by Klute himself: the order that he brings does violence to her habitual way of life. It is amid the debris of her apartment, the tokens of confusion, that he finds her about to go off with her former pimp, with the intention of returning, it seems, to her old life. When we finally return to the room after the dénouement and Cable's death, it is empty, swept bare of confusion and the debris of the old life, and eloquent of a new peace of mind and a new beginning as she prepares to leave with Klute for the country.

Outlined thus, it might seem to be a sentimental and evasive conclusion, the facile triumph of love in conditions in which one could confidently expect the noblest feelings to be corrupted. But Pakula keeps the tone of that final scene cool, non-committal, even ironic. Bree's salvation is tentative and qualified by her own admission that she might be back in New York next week, while knight-errant Klute takes his final bow carrying, amongst other pieces of luggage, a caged cat. And if their last exit is certainly a flight from the city, it is not necessarily a flight from reality. The world is all before them; and it is perhaps not the least of Pakula's qualities that he is able to leave us with this open ending, that he is capable of exploring the twilight zones of society and the human psyche without succumbing to the easy temptations of black romanticism or cultural pessimism.

John Rignall

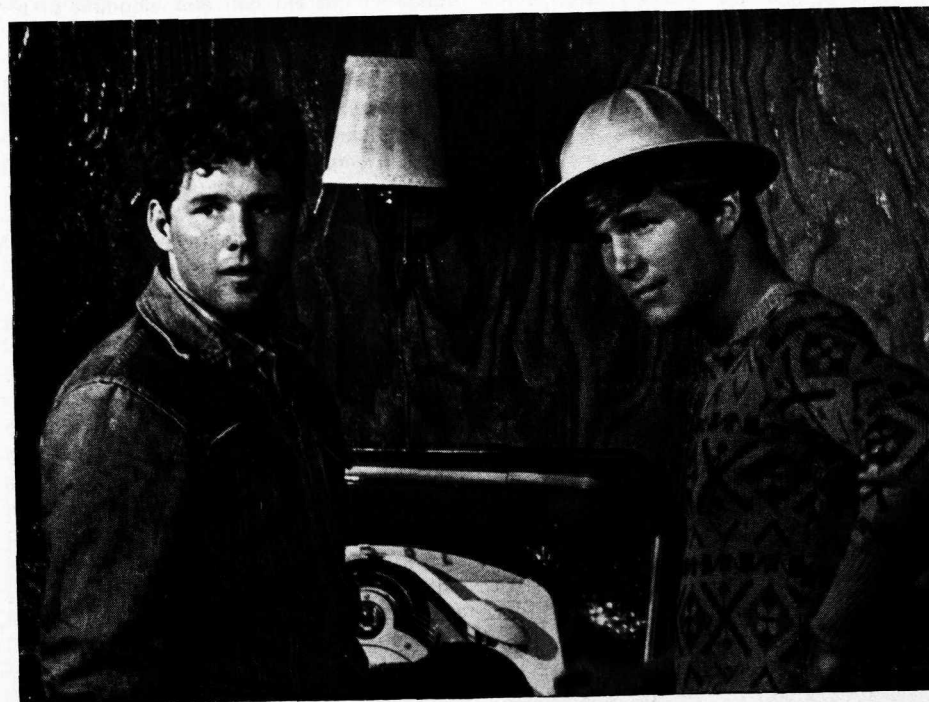
The Last Picture Show

In a celebrated review of *Bicycle Thieves*, Bazin speaks of it as the end of cinema: nowadays, fortified by Lukacs's distinction between the epic and the novel, one would perhaps speak of the end of the cinema's *innocence*. No longer sustained by its initial impetus, the art-form turns reflexive, hesitates over itself, sees itself as problematic.

In Europe a sizeable body of cineastes welcomed the change with open arms. But what for some is a liberation is for others a signal for entrenchment. In Hollywood at all events the decline, seen at first hand, of a great tradition elicits a certain nostalgia that is perhaps unhealthy for new talents: in this context we can situate *The Last Picture Show*, Peter Bogdanovich's second feature film. Bogdanovich in his role as critic is obviously aware of the cinema's loss of innocence — is not the closing of the 'Royale', the picture house of the film's title, with a screening of *Red River* explicitly intended as a metaphor for this 'coming of age'? For Bogdanovich, however, the coming of age can only be regretted: with nothing new to look forward to, he proceeds to embalm the past. If the future shows only an empty page, the past can at least be imitated. Like the poet or novelist who looks back wistfully to a lost golden age, Bogdanovich tirelessly contemplates the work of the *old masters*.

The question that arises is whether Bogdanovich in this film is capable of incorporating his awareness of Hollywood's past creatively into the fabric of his own vision. It is not true of course that Bogdanovich is unaware of the historical dimension.

Soul music for the hillbillies



The Last Picture Show USA 1971 Dir Peter Bogdanovich Pr S J Friedman Sc Larry McMurray and P B Phot Robert Surtees Ed Donn Cambern Cast Timothy Bottoms (Sonny) Jeff Bridges (Duane) Cybill Shepherd (Jacey) Ben Johnson (Sam the Lion) Cloris Leachman (Ruth Popper) Prod BBS for Columbia (118 min)

Quite the contrary: *The Last Picture Show* is reflexive in the sense that it is saturated with memories of the cinema. It is a film about the cinema rather than about almost anything else. The aim is not, certainly, to produce a 'realistic' portrait of small town America in 1951. Bogdanovich realises that the cinema is not, in Godard's dictum, the reflection of reality, but rather, the reality of a reflection: this paradox asserts among other things the overriding importance respected, indeed exploited, by Bogdanovich, of an audience's expectation of the medium, their awareness of the manipulations of an already established genre. Bogdanovich's aim, then, in *The Last Picture Show* is to create, with the audience's complicity, the timeless American film, a film to stand for all Hollywood films ever made in the 40's and 50's, an *ur-movie*.

An ambitious task: unfortunately, the seams of this composite picture are only too visible. If the very best melodramas of the 50's have an undeniable dramatic force, it is because they are simultaneously 'cool', because in an important sense they are underplayed: there is a certain toughness in them that gives their poignancy resonance. With Bogdanovich, on the contrary, the attempt to encompass everything leads to emotional inflation. Much of the trouble lies in his lack of critical distance. The successful artist uses the genre only to transform it: there are times in *The Last Picture Show* when we feel that Bogdanovich uses the genre not so much to transform it as to ape it. One would be happier if the film showed signs of creative parody. But parody is precisely

what *The Last Picture Show* is not. It is in short an imitation and runs the risk, as all imitations do, of being called a fake. Perhaps most serious of all, Bogdanovich is confused, about which genre he is imitating in the first place.

One might speak then of the film as a confection; I use the word to convey a certain artificiality in his portrayal of Anarene, for there is an obvious sense in which Bogdanovich feels that in getting the trappings right (decor, clothes, street settings) authenticity will be guaranteed. In other words, backed up by a good art director and a cameraman who knows how to imitate the grains and texture of a 50's feature, he cannot go wrong. There seems to be a general failure to go beyond the mere 'thingness' of his objects in order to investigate their connotations, their difference, their fullness. The objects become fetishes whose period accuracy is in the end all that counts: Duane's Mercury is a case in point, standing gleaming like an advertisement from the National Geographic magazine; this is also true to a lesser extent of the cars of Jacey and her mother. The date on the classroom blackboard reminds us that we are witnessing events that take place in February 1951. Adlai Stevenson's presidential nomination is overheard on the television. On Jacey's bed period magazines are tastefully arranged. When Ruth and Sonny first sleep together the sequence also opens with a close-up of three magazines lying on a 'fifties style' sideboard. Even the refrigerator and the Dr Pepper's coke in Ruth's kitchen acquire the same overtones. Similarly, Bogdanovich's use of music is suspect — the insistent country and western songs draw attention to themselves in too demanding a way, as guarantee of period atmosphere. (It's interesting to see that country and western music is once more 'fashionable' and define the film as such, in the same ways as the soundtracks of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* helped to 'sell' their product.)

In more general terms the film is itself of course an imitation of Ford, Hawks, Kazan: imitation, once more, rather than critique. The quotation from *Red River*, as well as pointing to a contrast between the myth and the reality of Texas, serves to remind us, as if that were necessary, that Bogdanovich sees himself as the heir to Hawks. But it's a quotation that has no sharpness, that rests entirely on the level of nostalgia. For Bogdanovich, an extract from *Red River* speaks for itself. We are entitled to ask for more. Peter Wollen has already pointed out (7 Days, March 22nd 1972) that *The Last Picture Show* aims at bringing together the Hawks theme of the all male group with Ford's vision of an organically inter-

related community. This is what I meant when I spoke of Bogdanovich's ambivalence. For isn't the film also a sentimental education which aims to make its points through the consciousness of its hero Sonny Crawford? Now Ford's films tend to have no heroes and consequently the community can be investigated on all levels without the encumbrance of a mediating consciousness (Preminger's 'objective' stance is another case in point). While Hawks' films tend to investigate a given group, stressing their mutual interdependence, Bogdanovich attempts to run together at least three different and sometimes contradictory conceptions of mise-en-scene and this leads to disastrous consequences. For if the film is supposed to unfold through Sonny's eyes, what relevance have the sequences involving Jacey and her mother? Whose sentimental education is it?

It is meant, of course, to be Sonny's, whose mentor Sam the Lion acts as the repository of decency and the old conservative values Bogdanovich cherishes. And here it seems to me that precisely because the film is an imitation, it falls into the traps of cliché and sentimentality, for despite all Bogdanovich's prodding, Sam the Lion simply doesn't work: it's not a question of a lack of conviction on anyone's part, but rather the means Bogdanovich deploys to put over his message. The problem is one of mise-en-scène. In every scene in which Sam appears the camera lingers a shade too long, the dialogue becomes mawkish and trite. 'I'm just as sentimental as the next fellow when it comes to old times' he says to Sonny in the scene by the reservoir. There is a pause: 'Old times' he repeats; 'I brought a young lady here one time,' and he launches into a description of the 'craziness' of those old times. But if bathing nude and riding horses across the reservoir for a silver dollar with Jacey's mother are supposed to stand for poetry or authentic feelings, we are entitled to draw back

... Old Times... Sam the Lion and his admirers



and withhold our assent from Lois's proposition that 'If it hadn't been for Sam, I'd just about have missed it I guess, whatever it was...'. Whatever it was indeed! In the same manner Sonny's and Duane's trip to Mexico are an excuse for a seven second close up on Sam's face as he waves goodbye for the last time. The character of Billy in this respect relies heavily on cliché: armed with broomstick and cap he can be used to add pathos to any scene — Sam's funeral springs to mind, but also the picture house itself where on both occasions of a film being shown, the camera pans up to Billy on the projection stand happily and innocently watching the films Bogdanovich refuses to interrogate...

The position is the same elsewhere. The individual parts are milked for all they are worth; the emphasis is on big performances and it's not surprising that an American film establishment that sees the merit of films in terms of Oscars for everything else before direction should duly reward the actress who plays the Ruth Popper part. The definition in this case of a 'big performance' involves a stereotype that may well possess an odd ideological significance. The actress in question will be a mature woman caught up in a situation over which she has little control; she will be hard and cynical on the surface, but secretly full of feeling. The camera will frequently catch her holding back tears. Patricia Neal in *Hud* and Katherine Hepburn in *The Lion in Winter* are representative examples of this mode and it is interesting to see that in *The Last Picture Show* at least two more characters, the waitress Genevieve and Lois Farrow, Jacey's mother, also qualify for this treatment (three, if one counts Mrs Moulsey who can't run the movie house by herself after Sam's death). Against this insistence on 'psychological depth' and 'exploration of emotions' it is hardly necessary to place Godard's astringent use of characterization, indeed his refusal to go

in for 'characterization' in the accepted sense at all. One might also mention the way in which certain Hollywood directors (Hitchcock for example) undercut our notions of characterization by employing actors against type, or, alternatively, by using lighting, montage and cutting as subverting factors, factors which contradict the characters' surface performance. For behind all this is the realisation, not apparently shared by Bogdanovich, that a certain type of acting has a certain ideological undertow; viz (in this case) a passive, bourgeois acceptance of things, characters delighting in their own tragic pathos, a 'falsely Chekovian' stance of tragedy as consolation, summed up in a piece of representative dialogue: 'It could have been worse' — 'You can say that about almost anything', or Sam's 'You wouldn't believe how this country's changed', or Genevieve's 'Sure, I wish we'd made it'. Again, we are tempted to say that Billy's death is introduced merely as an excuse for the final tearful confrontation between Sonny and Ruth (being in any case mute, Billy can't complain of the injustice of this). In short, the tragedy is factitious precisely because the film sees itself as tragedy and the audience's expectations are agreeably gratified. Sonny 'makes it up' with Ruth; the camera lingers in close up on their clasped hands. Tears of anger change to tears of reconciliation. The audience is invited to identify with this response to Billy's death. One might mention at this point the fact that Billy's death brings out precisely this clenched, fighting-tears-back response in Sonny as he drags the body away from the group of cattle truck drivers, that I have diagnosed in the Ruth Popper character. The whole sequence is instructive in Bogdanovich's acceptance of cinematic cliché: from the portentous windblown and deserted streets of its opening shots, through the glimpse of Billy's broom lying on the road, followed by a rapid zoom in to close up, Sonny's cry of 'He was my friend,' the dragging of Billy's body to the steps, the covering of his face with Sonny's jacket, to the final close up of Billy's cap (another motif developed at length during the film), the scene is 'played' for all it is worth. To repeat, it is not a question of a lack of conviction, or even of a lack of taste or reticence. Simply, that as the scene stands, it is overwhelmingly fabricated; it is transparently a set piece of a type of acting both outdated and inauthentic whose end product is just such looseness of critical focus.

The Last Picture Show has had a fair amount of acclaim and this form of updated costume drama (Mulligan's *Summer of 42* and Malle's *Souffle au Coeur* also spring to mind) looks like supplying a popular need for nostalgia. All the more reason to remain sceptical: the cinema Bogdanovich so much admires, thrives on action and abrasiveness. His film, on the contrary, is soft in the centre and, in the last resort, marred by a fatal literalness.

Mark LeFanu

All That Heaven Allows

Until very recently, Douglas Sirk remained in a kind of critical limbo. In the last couple of years some valuable and novel material has appeared, covering many aspects of his work. The most important element so far left unstudied is Sirk's relationship to the melodrama, the genre he most used during both his German period (1935-37) in feature films, and in his second American period, at Universal (1950-58).

Two reasons, certainly, have contributed to the neglect of Sirk. One is an almost total ignorance about his cultural formation in Weimar Germany. The other is a repeated failure, even among those who have praised him, to take adequate account of the highly specific conditions of production surrounding his work.¹ Sirk is most definitely an *auteur*, but an *auteur* working in circumstances far from ideal, and rarely able to direct his own projects. And since *All that Heaven Allows* was not a project of his own choice, it is an exemplary object of study, since it focuses many of the problems in discussing Sirk's American work.

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After a difficult early period in America (1939-1948), during much of which he was under contract to Columbia, Sirk finally signed up with Universal in 1950, and stayed with this studio until 1958-9. His first big commercial success with Universal was *Magnificent Obsession*, a film produced by Ross Hunter, and starring Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson. *Magnificent Obsession* is an awful, but strong story, written by Lloyd C. Douglas,

Life at the country club...



and first filmed by John Stahl in the 'thirties. Sirk's version would merit a study of its own, since it shows perhaps better than any other film the split-level construction to be found in almost all the movies he made for Ross Hunter. However, the point here is that *All That Heaven Allows* was thought up by the studio in order to cash in on the sudden success of *Magnificent Obsession*. The same producer: Ross Hunter; the same cast: Jane Wyman, Rock Hudson, Agnes Moorehead. Elements of the same structure — in particular Jane Wyman as the older woman, widowed, falling in love with a younger man.

From there on, of course, one must consider Sirk's work on the film. *All That Heaven Allows* has really got no story worth talking about — unlike *Magnificent Obsession*, which has a very strong and inflexible story, and an unavoidable structure. But it is precisely this flabbiness in *Heaven* (the result of its purely opportunist origins) which gives Sirk much more room. Thematically, *Heaven* is much richer than *Obsession*; stylistically, it is much better integrated (although *Obsession*, filmed by Russell Metty, contains several striking moments).

When praised, Sirk has tended to attract attention either as a 'stylist' (Sarris, the *Cahiers*), or as a master of the weepie. He certainly is an excellent stylist (having himself been a painter, amongst other things); and he was a master of the weepie — but he was not interested in the weepie. The lack of interest is just as important as the mastery. Both

All That Heaven Allows USA 1955 **Dir** Douglas Sirk **Pr** Ross Hunter **Sc** Peg Fenwick **Phot** Russell Metty **Art Dir** Alex Goltzner and Eric Orbom **Ed** Frank Gross **Cast** Jane Wyman (Cary Scott) Rock Hudson (Ron Kirby) Agnes Moorehead (Sara Warren) Conrad Nagel (Harvey) Jacqueline de Wit (Mona Plash) **Prod** Universal (89 min)

positions ('stylist'; 'master of the weepie') fail to go deep enough into that curious product which is a Sirk film.

With very few exceptions, all Sirk's films at Universal were composites, and they must therefore be 'viewed' as composites, as multi-layered products. On the one hand, they are the outcome of the demands of the front office at Universal, the desires and phantasies of producers like Ross Hunter, incarnated by actors and actresses like Jane Wyman, Rock Hudson, Lana Turner and Sandra Dee. On the other, they are the products of Douglas Sirk, lit and shot by Russell Metty (or Irving Glassberg).

This multi-layered quality, resulting from the composite nature of film production, ties up with the question of genre — in this case the melodrama. To my knowledge, a serious study of the melodrama remains to be written.² The very term 'melodrama' already indicates a composite of some kind. The general drift of the word is in the direction of emotion and sentiment (or sentimentality). It is a genre in both literature and cinema appealing to a mass audience. The record of Universal and of Ross Hunter in particular is very clear. The attraction for Sirk overlapped, but did not coincide with that of the studio and Hunter. Sirk was attracted by the mass audience, and by the scope which the melodrama gave him for making films about contemporary America. Indeed, as far as he was concerned, the melodrama was the genre which best allowed for comment on the society in which he was living and working — and not just comment, but criticism.

The reviews of Sirk's theatre work in Germany, particularly during his period at Bremen (1923-29), repeatedly praise his ability to transform and transcend unlikely material; and his first big hit in the cinema (*Schlussakkord*, 1936) was the result of his own transformation of the script (a melodrama). With space, it would be possible to study this constant in Sirk's work: the capacity to transform material, and the extremely precise historical awareness of the potentiality of a specific genre — whether in Germany or in America.

For most of Sirk's time at Universal, America was basking complacently under President Eisenhower. The society was already disintegrating, but this was not visible on the surface. The complacency of the Administration in Washington was shared with enthusiasm by entrepreneurs like Ross Hunter in Hollywood. The society thus promoted the melodrama, which was its own chosen genre. Yet, for Sirk, it was precisely the melodrama which allowed for a critical discourse on this society, and from a historical point

of view. It was the only genre able to ponder contemporary America — a capacity for self-analysis inevitably hidden from its most eager promoters. On the surface, Ross Hunter had his Jane Wyman-Rock Hudson 'weepie', complacent and complicit. Just beneath the surface, Douglas Sirk had a swingeing attack on petit bourgeois moralism — 'displaced' not only because of the varying exigencies of the studio, but also through choice.

Sirk has explained at some length his views on the necessary distance a critique of a certain kind of society must be placed at in order to make good cinema (or good theatre, or good literature).³ His pantheon of references includes Euripides, Shakespeare, Ca'derón, Lope de Vega, Molière, Chekhov. Explicitness is to be avoided when working in a society like Eisenhowerian America — but not in a society like Weimar Germany, where Sirk staged plays like Blume's *Im Namen des Volkes* (about Sacco and Vanzetti). In other words, although the melodrama was the form presented to him by the studio, it was also the form which he himself chose, given the overall social situation.

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The melodrama was both the genre which was most available at a particular juncture in American history, and the genre which best allowed for a critical portrayal of the fossilization of the American bourgeoisie.

All That Heaven Allows is set in a small New England town. New England, the starting-point of white, WASP America. The place where contemporary America started, and started to go wrong. Yet also at the time (1955) perhaps the area of America least aware of what was really happening in the society as a whole. New England: the home of Thoreau and Emerson. Into *All That Heaven Allows* Sirk has built the history of the concealed disintegration of the society.

In the film Jane Wyman is a recently-widowed mother of two children, both of whom are of college age. Her dead husband was, apparently, a prosperous member of the local bourgeoisie. They live in a white frame house, with a garden. Rock Hudson is the local gardener (independent businessman, but engaged in manual work). Hudson and his trees are both America's past and America's ideals. They are ideals which are now unattainable — and, when they actually offer themselves in concrete form, are swiftly rejected by Wyman and her bourgeois friends on her behalf. For, since the time when these ideals were established, the society has lost touch with its own past. It has become fossilized, unable to cope even with its own ideology.

It is, therefore, on the contemporary bourgeoisie that Sirk focusses his attention, showing it both in its isolation, and in its breakdowns — when confronted with its unattainable ideals. Rock Hudson and his world are sketched in with comparative ease: gardening, trees, a beat-up old station wagon, and a free and easy party, with check table-cloth, wine, lobsters, singing, dancing and nice friends. Wyman's world is more complex.



...and at home: even the children perpetuate tradition through repression

The town is introduced from the church steeple — recalling a scene in *Zu Neuen Ufern* (1937), where Paramatta, the penal settlement in Australia whither the heroine has been consigned by the British ruling class, is similarly introduced from its church tower (while the sound-track carries the voices of the women prisoners singing in church). The parallel, at least in Sirk's mind, seems to be there. Nor is the choice of the church steeple by any means haphazard: for the church, in Sirk's world, is one of the key agents of mystification — in contemporary America, as in a British colony a century before.

The steeple dominates the town, and from it the camera moves down, as the credits appear, across the town to Jane Wyman's house. In the very first scene Sirk establishes in masterly style two of his basic themes: loneliness and repression (the latter shown by embarrassment). Agnes Moorehead, who later describes herself with the words, 'I'm Cary's best friend', suddenly tells Jane Wyman (Cary) she is too busy to have a planned lunch with her. Jane Wyman then embarrassedly invites Rock Hudson to share the lunch — her desire to escape loneliness tentatively overcoming her mindless class isolation. From then on Hudson tries to draw Wyman out of her bourgeois world and prejudices. We are shown the specific components of this world: house (home), children, friends (so-called), and the country club. By all of these Cary is entrapped.

Primarily by her children, in an active sense. Sirk's attitude to children (and perhaps to American children in particular?) is a deeply pessimistic one. As he has explained, children are to be seen not as the new generation, but as the imitators of the old, the perpetrators of tradition and repression, and thus both conservative and tragic. Both Jane Wyman's two children try to hold her in the past, with a wealth of nauseating selfish-

ness and sexual oppression. They openly resent Rock Hudson on class grounds, as an insult to Dad's memory. Dad is still present in the form of his trophies, which sit like corpses on the fireplace. When Jane Wyman removes them, after she starts her affair with Hudson, the children object vigorously. They fight to keep the home as a mausoleum. They actually want to mummify their mother.⁴

So do her friends. Sara Warren (Agnes Moorehead), while claiming to provide sympathy and understanding, is basically an agent of repression — although she mediates the oppression of others by leavening it with a modicum of intelligence and 'sympathy'. Thus, of course, she is more insidious than the blatant Mona Plash (Jacqueline de Witt), the town gossip. (There is also a more complicated division of labour in the repression: Mona's is more on the sexual front, Sara's on the class front). Wyman's insecurity is thus depicted as eminently social. She has no one to whom to turn to check out her condition, since everyone has an ideological stake in keeping her a widow — children, friends, and Harvey, her elderly and tedious suitor.

Much of the film is a slashing assault on pretence, one of Sirk's favourite themes. It is not the structural core to the film, as it is in, for example, *Stützen der Gesellschaft* (1935) or *All I Desire* (1953); but *Heaven*, along with *Imitation of Life* (1958) represents Sirk's most sustained dissection of pretence connected with class, fakery which has accumulated historically and now caked into ideology.

Sirk's interest in illness and ailments has already been noted by several critics.⁵ There is a long parade of the lame and the blind. And a parallel gallery of doctors. But what has been less stressed is Sirk's interest in social illness and breakdown, of which individual sickness is only a component, or a reflection.

Several of Sirk's films are examinations of communities or societies unknowingly on the verge of breakdown, and he therefore focuses on the moments and the locales of collapse: churches, doctors' consulting rooms, hospitals, bars and parties. Clergymen and doctors are not symbols in Sirk's films. They are there because they do actually inhabit the interstices of life. Sirk delights in portraying people edging toward crisis, or in crisis, for it is in this condition that they reveal themselves — drinking, praying and in their 'love life' (people also reveal themselves, but for the good, in painting, singing and dancing). With breakdown comes the smashing of pretence. At the country club, the prosperous bourgeoisie, attempting to oppress Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson, brings itself close to breakdown — Howard Hoffer (Donald Curtis), sufficiently inebriated, makes an awful pass at Cary, bringing on Hudson's break with the club (but not Wyman's).

The two parties in *Heaven* are the two condensations of the alternative worlds. The party given by Hudson's friends, the Andersons, helps to open up to Cary a vision of the life she might have with him; the country club party only serves to solidify her weakness (and her 'best friend' helps to accentuate this). Unable to integrate Hudson into her wretched world, overcome with embarrassment, she decides to drop him — much to the delight of her children.

At this point, Sirk introduces his Thoreau elements, obliquely. Hudson's condition is made clear while he is out hunting with a friend, clad in full New England hunting gear — a scene repeated in *Written on the Wind*, where Hudson also goes hunting, this time with his father, a proletarian Irishman, to shake the world of the millionaire Hadleys out of his system. 'You're no good to anyone, and you're no good to yourself' his friend tells him. 'I know' says Hudson. Likewise, Cary, now suffering from recurrent headaches visits the doctor (Dr. Hennessy), who tells her it is nature's way of protesting. 'Can't you give me something?' she asks. To which comes the Sirkian answer: 'Do you expect me to give you a prescription for life?' The doctor then advises her to marry Hudson. The parallel here hardly needs emphasizing: nature in Hudson's case is the actual environment, the world he is living in; in Wyman's case it is something still internal, fighting for expression, which has to be revealed to her by her headaches and then by the doctor.

The end reflects the film's origins in *Magnificent Obsession*. After an accident (to Hudson), *Heaven* ends with Wyman tending a prostrate Hudson, just recovering consciousness; in *Obsession* it is Hudson (a doctor) tending the prostrate Wyman, just recovering consciousness and sight. But whereas in *Obsession* the camera moves from the sickbed to a desert landscape seen through the window, with the sun rising, in *Heaven* it moves to the picture-window, with snow outside and a doe.

Yet this ending has to be queried, in the light of Sirk's repeated statements

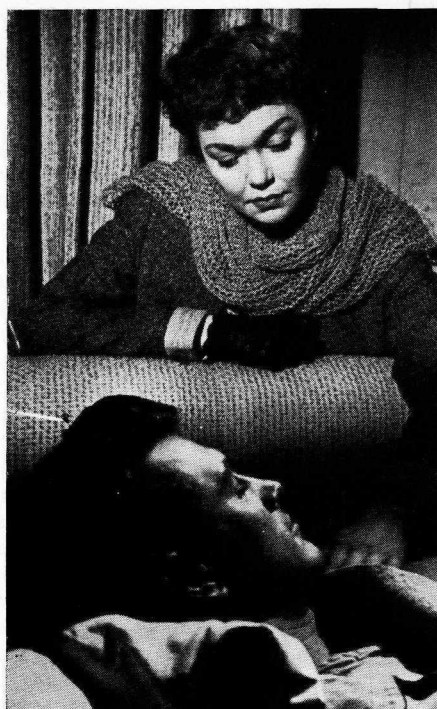
of his antipathy to 'happy ends' (an antipathy which emerges from the very structure and thematic of his work). There is much indication that *Heaven* would have been improved without its 'happy end'. The themes of disintegration and despair so dear to Sirk would have fitted much better into a gloomy end. There is, therefore, a deep irony built into *Heaven*. Is Jane Wyman really reconstructed? Has she broken with her past? For sure, the New England town has not come round to sympathize with her position.

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Heaven is not a major Sirk film, simply because of the fact that it was not one of his own projects, and was burdened with the legacy of *Magnificent Obsession*. But it is a fairly representative Sirk. And for this reason a good object of analysis.

Heaven is a film about apparently marginal issues, which in fact are utterly central to the America of the Eisenhower epoch. Sirk has managed to depict both the concrete and the abstract — both the inhabitants of America, and their class relations by showing the space between people, how they meet. The ruling class (attacked right through Sirk's films from *Stützen* onwards, and particularly in *Written on the Wind*) is sustained only by pretence, and therefore has to live by ritual. They are actually cut off from each other. The character of Harvey here is exemplary. Harvey lives by — and inspires — only ritual. He drinks, eats, drives his car, and talks in a ritual. It is for him that Ned (Cary's son) applies himself to mixing martinis, over which they exchange completely vapid comments (Harvey describing a wonderful doctor he has just found on a trip to Florida). In such a world, things have become as important as people — Dad's trophies as though they were him, Hudson's old station wagon as being him, etc.

The finest condensation of ritual and materialism comes at Christmas. And here one must pay homage to Sirk for bringing together in masterly and effortless way the themes of Thoreau and the New England Christmas (via trees). Christmas is the moment of mass mystification, the accentuation of ritual and the obliteration of other people. It is a time of alcohol, and of materialism (the gift). It is also a time of spectacle. Jane Wyman, having announced clearly that getting a TV set would be an acknowledgement of her loneliness, is given a TV by her children — in order to keep her immured in her loneliness. Framed in mistletoe, the set is brought forward to the sound of the salesman's voice: 'drama, comedy, all life's parade at your fingertips'. The set is not turned on — all it shows is Wyman's face reflected in the blank screen, framed by the mistletoe. What is so impressive about this sequence is that it is simultaneously visually extraordinarily striking and sociologically, a brilliant resumé of the oppression of the gift — since the TV has been given more in the interest of the givers, than in the interests of the recipient. Furthermore, this gift is placed squarely within the bourgeois family, and at Christmas



Wyman tending a prostrate Hudson

time (Sirk returns to Christmas, though more elliptically, in *Imitation of Life*).⁶

Andrew Sarris has rightly praised Sirk's audacity, and written that 'the essence of Sirkian cinema is the direct confrontation of all material, however fanciful and improbable'.⁷ This does, however, need to be applied not merely to Sirk's visual style (and his musical style, also of great complexity) but to the actual material at hand, and to the social confrontations in his films: the confrontations between social classes in *Zu Neuen Ufern*, between British oppressors and Irish revolutionaries in *Captain Lightfoot*, between generations and races and classes in *Imitation of Life*. Sirk's audacity is indeed visual and musical, but it is also a social audacity — the ability to bring alive a whole society, whether it be New England in the fifties, or Nazi Germany near the end of the war (*A Time to Love and a Time to Die*); this confrontation of material is, in other words, the presentation of the conflicts and contradictions within the society. *All That Heaven Allows*, although a film by a German emigrant, is certainly one of the best and most revealing films about America on the verge of its breakdown.

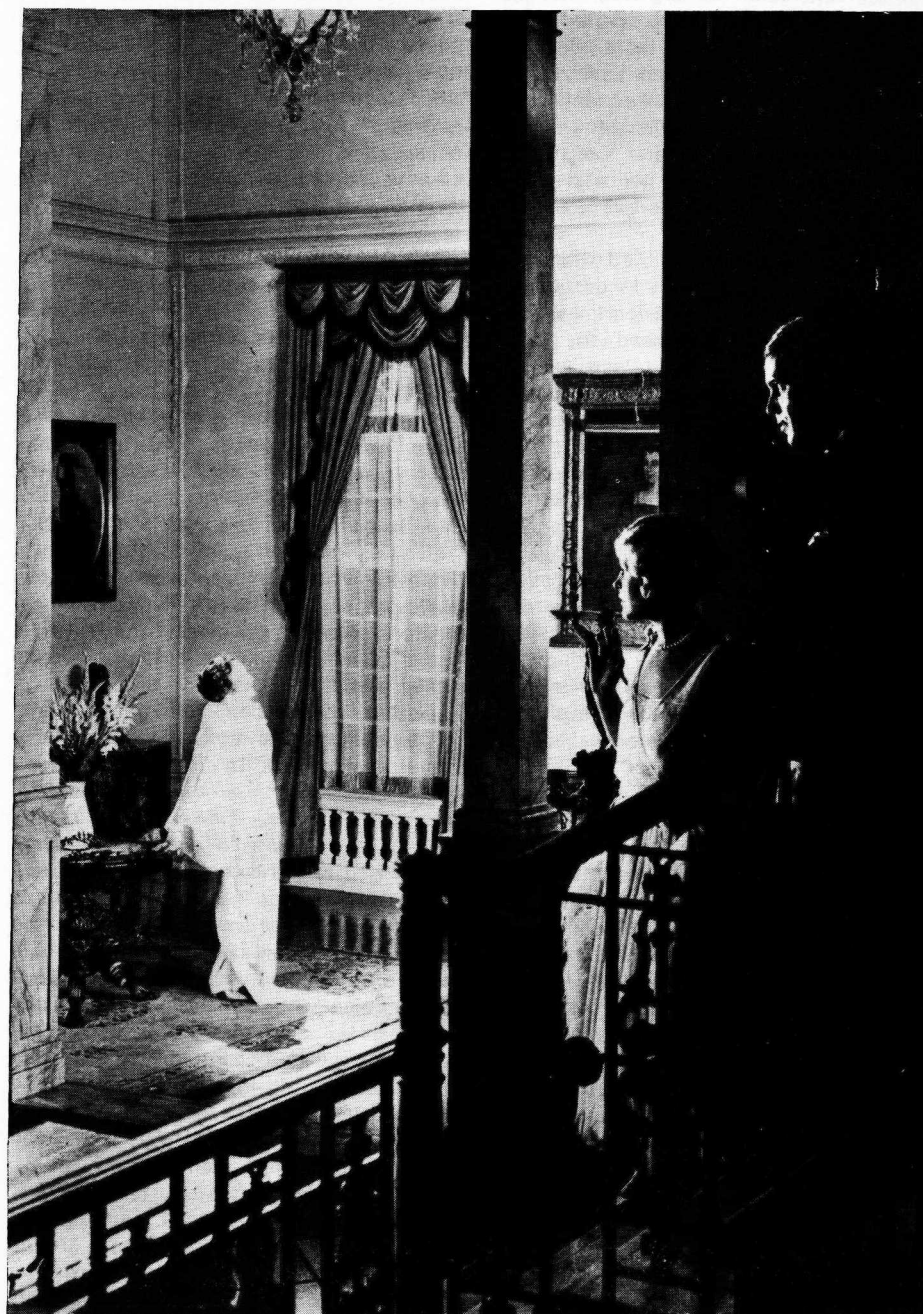
Jon Halliday

¹ I have tried to remedy these defects in my book of interviews, *Sirk on Sirk*, London and New York, (Cinema One), 1972.
² For recent contributions on the subject, see Bibliography in this issue [Ed. note].
³ Sirk himself (in *Sirk on Sirk*) has emphasized that 'the play must please'. There is certainly an important psychic aspect to the apparent 'displacement' operated in Sirk's melodramas. One of Freud's collaborators, Hanns Sachs embarked on an attempt to adumbrate a theory of displacement in the cinema in the 'twenties' (Hanns Sachs, 'Film Psychology', *Close Up* vol. III, no 5 (November 1928)).
⁴ Wyman's daughter actually talks to her (in her bedroom) about how they used to wall up widows in the pyramids.
⁵ Particularly Jean-Louis Comolli in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 189 (April 1967).
⁶ On the gift, see Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, London 1970.
⁷ Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema*, New York, 1968, p. 109. In the light of Sirk's information it is necessary to reject the comparison-assimilation between Sirk and Stahl suggested by Sarris.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE STUDIO-PICTURE

Narrative Patterns in some Hollywood Films of the 20's

Clarence Brown's *Smouldering Fires*



For most of its existence the American film industry has operated with an incredible awareness and acceptance of the desires and responses of its potential audiences. Many directors, for example, have been willing to submerge their own interests in order to satisfy their audiences' values and expectations. Though critics have generally treated such occurrences as cynical examples of box office expediency or the sacrifice of artistic integrity, a closer examination of these directors' statements reveals not opportunism but an abiding trust in, and willingness to serve, the values of the masses who compose their potential audiences. René Clair's description of a preview audience's response to his film, *I Married a Witch*, sums up this implicit trust: 'The audience can be a collection of imbeciles, idiots, and cretins. They may not know anything about movies, perhaps they don't know anything about anything. But by bringing them together a sort of collective genius arises from among them, a collective, spontaneous way of reacting to your film. And that genius is right, no matter how wrong each of them might be separately. When they start coughing, you know you've lost their attention, it's time to start wondering what you've done wrong.'¹

The following statement by King Vidor illustrates the way in which this sort of artist willingly adjusts his personal interests and preoccupations to those of his audience: 'Elmer Rice, the playwright, once said, "As a dramatist's intellect grows, his audience becomes smaller." I don't wholly concur with Mr. Rice, because I believe that no subject is over the heads of an audience if it is told simply, clearly, and sincerely. But I do believe that as the intellect of an artist grows, the scope of the things that interest him most certainly diminishes. A film story then must find a sympathetic understanding in the mind and emotions of the man who will bring it to life, and he must be able so to translate and interpret these ideas that they will engender a favourable reaction in the minds and emotions of the spectators.'

'I will not deny that it is a great satisfaction to know that people are standing in line to see one of my films. I am constantly in search of a story that will so fulfill the needs and aspirations of the public that word-of-mouth advertising will fill the theatres for months on end.'²

This audience-centred aesthetic appears most conspicuously in the practice of previewing a new film before an unsuspecting audience prior to the film's general release. While the audience would record its reactions on cards after the performance, studio production staffs would be most interested in the spontaneous reactions that occurred during the screening, and would reshape the film to eliminate boring or inappropriate passages. Frank Capra taped an audience's reactions to a preview of *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* in order to obtain an objective record of their responses: '...in the quiet of my office, away from the flushed hysteria of curbstone conferences, the tape told me the detailed

story, foot by foot, scene by scene, of exactly what happened at the preview. Where the film was interest-grabbing, the audience was silent, hushed. Where it was dull or long, I heard coughs, shufflings, rattlings of peanut bags. The laughs — from giggles to guffaws — were measured exactly in length and volume. To our surprise some gags were funnier, others less funny, than expected. Some good lines were lost in the over-laughes. We picked up many added laughs by lengthening the film between gag lines. And so, like tailors tearing apart and rebuilding a coat to their chalk marks, we re-edited our film to the tape.¹³

The following story about Clara Bow illustrates how an audience's possible reaction could influence even the style of acting during a film's production. Clarence Badger, the director of *It*, relates this in a letter to Mr James Card of Eastman House, who made it available to me: 'When filming her in one particular close-up shot for *It*, which called for expression of that great moment when love first enters a young girl's heart, Clara, following my directions, gazed at her 'sweetheart' with an expression of lingering, calf-like longing on her pretty face; perfectly all right if she had stopped there. But she did not. Continuing on, the camera still grinding away, her doll-like tantalizing eyes suddenly became inflamed with unwholesome passion. Then the young rascal suddenly changed her expression again, this time to one of virtuous, innocent appeal.

'I stopped the camera. "And what was that all about, Clara?" I demanded. "Well," she came back, "if you knew your onions like you're supposed to, you'd know that first expression was for the love-sick dames in the audience, and that the second expression, that passionate stuff, was for the boys and their papas, and that that third expression — well, Mr Badger, just about the time all the old women in the audience had become shocked and scandalized by the passionate part, they'd suddenly see that third expression, become absorbed in it, and change their minds about me having naughty ideas, and go home thinking how pure and innocent I was; and having got me mixed up personally with this character I'm playing, they'd come again when my next picture showed up."

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Within such an audience-centred aesthetic, then, directors seemed to view their role as artists to be the presentation of their audience's common experience in a sharper than usual form. Unlike directors who worked in an artist-centred aesthetic, in which their audiences had to submerge their own common interests in order to discover the directors' personal interests, these directors were content to meet their audiences on their own terms.¹⁴ These statements also suggest the manipulative function of film narrative. Capra's description of his job as analogous to a tailor's neatly sums up the aesthetic of the studio film. Furthermore, since the communality of experience assumed by such an aesthetic precludes the ambiguity found in artist-centred

films, the narrative patterns of these movies, and their effects, are unusually accessible to critical examination. Films of this type need not interpretation but careful descriptive criticism which delineates how a story is told and, on that basis, attempts to specify the particular effect caused by a specific narrative method.

The narrative Hollywood films of the 1920's, especially those concerned with what might roughly be called the realistic problems of everyday life, offer an excellent opportunity for such critical examination, since they exhibit similar narrative techniques owing less to production line standardization than to economical and effective storytelling. In all of this, it is important to recognize that while the narrative content — the portion generally treated by critical interpretation — is not complex, its presentation within an effective form still raises the same sort of complicated problems as the ambiguous narratives of artist-centred films.

Film narrative and literary narrative are different in degree. Where the reader of a novel can pause in the midst of reading to think about what he has read, or skip back to reread an earlier section, the film viewer has no chance to take such a pause. Once a film begins it generally runs through to its conclusion without a stop. Seen from this perspective there is a greater necessity for film narrative to ensure that the viewer immediately and clearly understands what happens in the movie. And since film is not purely intellectual, the narrative content must be embodied in some satisfying form. In other words, the narrative must be logically coherent to the audience while also having the feel of emotional aptness.

In film, as in literature, these dual aims of narrative seem most usually to be achieved by means of the repetition of some kind of minimal unit. Logically, this sort of repetition ensures understanding; emotionally, it creates the feeling of familiarity. Though the idea of a 'minimal unit' may seem vague, the concept is necessary to encompass such diverse elements as action in the Aristotelean sense, gesture, camera movement, the arrangement of actors within the frame, or any other narrative component that might be repeated. The concept of a 'minimal unit' of repeated material is also useful because it allows one to distinguish between major and minor examples of repetition.

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In *The Freshman* (directed by Sam Taylor and Fred Newmeyer, 1925), Harold Lloyd is a college freshman who directs all of his energies towards becoming the most popular man on campus. He frequently discovers that some sort of chained-down object stands between himself and his goal. In its first appearance, the object is a ferocious bulldog chained to its doghouse. Harold encounters it when he chases a football that has gone out of the practice area and landed within the compass of the chain. He manages to get the ball by allowing the dog to chase him. He effectively shortens the length of the chain by getting the dog to wrap it around a pipe imbedded in the lawn between the doghouse and the football. When he has

retrieved the ball, however, the dog breaks its chain and he just manages to outrace it back to the safety of the practice area's fence. Later, much to his embarrassment, a football attached to the ground by a rope snaps back at him when he throws it. In the third instance of this pattern, he needs a hip flask for the tailor who cannot repair his suit without a drink — Harold has gone to a dance in a basted suit — and slips a flask from the hip pocket of another dancer only to discover that it is attached to the pocket by a chain. He is discovered as soon as he unwittingly tugs on the chain. Finally, near the end of his college's football game, with his team trailing, Harold catches the ball, but becomes frightened by the mass of tacklers bearing down on him. Here, he unthreads most of the football's laces and, holding the free end of the laces in his hand, sets the football down on the ground several feet away from himself. When the tacklers go for the ball, he deftly snaps the ball back to himself and walks down the field. Just as in the first example in the series, however, he is forced into a run when the other players realize what has happened.

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For an audience, though not for Harold, each repetition of the basic minimal unit creates both a sense of familiarity and a certain expectation based upon the way it had functioned in its previous occurrence or occurrences. By a funding of information and expectation, the series becomes more pleasing as it progresses. One can understand how this sort of repetition is meant to provide a sense of structure for an audience through one sequence in Buster Keaton's *Go West* (1925).

Keaton plays a fumbling, young man who leaves Indiana to find his fortune first in New York City and then in the far West. In New York he is repeatedly trampled by crowds of people on the sidewalks: somehow, he always seems to be going in the opposite direction. Once out West, he works on a cattle ranch where he ultimately falls in love with a cow named 'Brown Eyes'. When he learns that the cattle are to be shipped to the Los Angeles stockyards by train, he desperately searches for a way to save the cow. Through many complications, including an attempted hijacking of the train which leaves him alone at its controls, he brings the train to a stop in the Los Angeles terminal. He is still several miles from the stockyards (the train missed a spur line) and since the ranch-owner's future depends upon the delivery of the cattle on time, Keaton begins to lead the trainload of cattle through the city streets to the yards. He hopes that the owner may give him 'Brown Eyes' if the rest of the herd arrives there on time. Some cattle begin to stray. In desperation, he remembers how he once managed to get a steer to return to a corral by waving something red at it. Hoping to repeat the trick, he runs into a costume shop, demands something red to wear, and emerges dressed in a devil's suit with horns and a long tail. The suit helps him to lead the herd to the stockyard without

further trouble.

Even though Keaton consciously repeats the use of red to attract and control the herd, other repetitions occur in this sequence of which he is unaware. First, Keaton leads a herd rather than being trampled by one, as in New York City. Secondly, the horns and tail of the costume, rather than its colour, serve to emphasize his relationship with 'Brown Eyes', and demonstrate that he has changed since their first encounter in which she saved him from a bull. It is interesting that what concerns him in the sequence, obtaining something red, cannot be seen by the audience since the film is in black and white. Nevertheless, the unannounced repetition of the crowd situation and the details of the devil's costume cues in an audience's awareness that the character, like Harold in *The Freshman*, is finally in control of the events around him.

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While these repetitive patterns consist of the actions of a film's central character, *Smouldering Fires* (directed by Clarence Brown, 1925) employs spatial arrangements as reiterative punctuation to achieve the same effect. In this story of a love triangle composed of Jane Vale, the middle-aged president of a clothing manufacturing company, Robert Elliott, a production line inspector in the plant, and Dorothy Vale, Jane's attractive younger sister, Brown represents the triangle by returning, again and again, to the three figures arranged in a triangular grouping, most frequently with Robert and Dorothy each to one side and slightly below Jane in a pyramidal fashion. Brown emphasizes their divided passions by separating the group of three into two, spatially severed from the single other figure. Frequently, one member of the trio is inside a building or a room while the other two are outside that area. Thus at one point Jane is in the kitchen while Dorothy and Robert, standing outside, discuss the best way to tell Jane that Robert no longer wants to marry her. Brown accentuates the separation by cutting back and forth between the locations.

Smouldering Fires is an extraordinarily structured and polished film in which an audience is constantly reminded of the triangularity of the love situation. The sequence involving Jane in the kitchen concludes with a shot of her, Robert and Dorothy which sums up the problem of the rest of the movie. With Robert standing between them, emblematically establishing him as their common interest, Jane and Dorothy prepare to pull at opposite ends of a wishbone. The next shot shows a bell tower composed of three bells, the central one above the two flanking ones, pealing for Jane's and Robert's wedding. The next shot, again involving a triad, shows Jane and Robert kneeling before a minister. It is taken from behind the kneeling figures so that the couple flank the minister who towers above them.

At another point, after her marriage to Robert, Jane stands in Dorothy's bedroom trying to comfort her crying sister, while Robert is in the garden below. Jane asks Dorothy who has hurt her, and when

Dorothy refuses to talk, she begins to name some of the men who were at their party that evening. Still talking, she moves to the French windows overlooking the garden, opens them and calls out 'Bobby' to her husband below. She then sees, reflected in the open window pane, Dorothy's startled expression at the mention of Robert's name. Jane pretends, however, not to have seen anything, and on her way out she passes between the portraits of a man and a woman which frame the doorway. This is a visual equivalent of her new knowledge and position — she realizes that she now stands between Dorothy and Robert — and a variation of the triangular groupings mentioned above.

Another reiterative pattern in the film is of unintentional eavesdropping, a functional adjunct to the use of space, as when Jane sees Dorothy in the window-pane. Jane gradually realizes that her husband actually loves Dorothy and she engineers a situation that turns upon both reiterative patterns and allows her to sacrifice her love for the others' happiness. At Dorothy's twenty-first birthday party, Jane is seated at a table with Dorothy, Robert, and Scotty McDougal, an old trusted employee from the days when Jane's father ran the company. Though Jane has a present at hand to give to Dorothy, she pushes it off the table and sends Robert upstairs to fetch it from her dresser drawer. When Robert calls down that the drawer is locked, Jane sends Dorothy upstairs with the key to open it. Then, as Dorothy and Robert begin to come downstairs, but are still not visible to Jane, Jane loudly complains to Scotty that her marriage to Robert was a mistake, that she has been a fool to love such a younger man, and that she now wants her freedom. She has made sure that while Dorothy and Robert cannot see her, they can overhear her. When the pair re-enter the room, they move to Jane and form another triangular grouping with which the movie ends. Even though Jane consciously employs a method which is part of the structural patterns that I have been examining, she is not aware of it as a pattern. It is the director, Brown, who is aware of the meaning of the spatial separations that occur in the film.

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Skinner's Dress Suit (directed by William Seiter, 1926) presents two other kinds of repetitive patterns employed in many other films of the period. First, the movie begins and ends in the same place, Skinner's house, and at about the same time of day, 7.15am. Skinner is an accountant who weakly acquiesces in his wife's desires to keep up with the Joneses. He allows her to believe that he has received a substantial raise and she goes on a buying binge with credit on small monthly payments. The frenetic pace with which Skinner tries to keep up with his wife's growing burden of debts is established in the opening sequence. Our introduction to him is a sequence of him rushing through breakfast. His watch is shown: the time is 7.15 and he is hurrying to catch the 7.32 commuter train. At the end of the film, his bosses arrive at his

home at 7.15 and offer to rehire him — 'he has lost his job during the film — with a promotion.

Other comedies that make use of this pattern include *Mantrap* (directed by Victor Fleming, 1926) where one of the main characters, a divorce lawyer, begins and ends the film by counselling the same client in his office, and *Tilly the Toller* (directed by Hobart Henley, 1927) in which at both the beginning and end Tilly arrives for work at 'Simpkin's Household Appliance Company'.

In *Mantrap*, the lawyer at first cannot stand listening to the complaints of women any more, and decides to make off to the Canadian woods. Yet at the end of the film, through an encounter with a character at a trading post in the woods, played by Clara Bow, the lawyer returns to his New York office with a different attitude. He again counsels the woman whose complaints forced him to flee, but now views her as a potential conquest rather than a nuisance. At the beginning of *Tilly the Toller*, Tilly tries to get a job at Simpkin's in order to be near her boyfriend; at the end, she returns to Simpkin's to ask for her job back only to discover that it has already gone to someone else. Her boyfriend, whom she has left as well, offers her a 'job' as his wife, however, which she accepts.

In each pattern the ending differs from the beginning in some way although the location and time of day for both are the same.

Underworld (directed by Joseph Von Sternberg, 1927) begins with a bank robbery at 2am and ends with the aftermath of a foiled jailbreak that is planned to occur at roughly the same time. The character who successfully breaks into the bank at the beginning of the film, 'Bull' Weed, is the object of the unsuccessful attempt to break him out of jail near the film's conclusion. *Underworld* presents a variation of this pattern in that a meeting with confederates at a different locale, the hideout, is associated with both, the successful bank robbery and the abortive attempt at a jailbreak.

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Since I have been listing different sorts of repetitive narrative patterns, it seems appropriate to conclude with a film in which the repetition ultimately comes to haunt a character when she desperately tries to avoid it. The film is *Lady of Chance* (directed by Robert Z. Leonard, 1928) in which Norma Shearer portrays a confidence-woman named Dolly Morgan. Her speciality is extorting money from wealthy married men whom she lures to her hotel room. At the appropriate moment, her 'husband' bursts in and the embarrassed man is threatened with public exposure and scandal unless he pays them to remain silent.

At the beginning of the movie she has selected a new man to shake down in this way. Before she can put her plan into effect, two people she used to work with, Brad and Gwen, demand that she cut them into whatever her current plan is, or they will tell the police where to find her. This frightens her since the police are already on her tail. Thus from the

first, Dolly finds herself in the same position in which she places her victims. She reluctantly agrees to team up with them and together they shake down the man she had been working on. Brad and Gwen have no intention of sharing the money with her, however, and when she asks for her share, Brad tells her the man stopped payment on the check he gave them. He offers her twenty dollars 'out of the goodness of his heart'. Dolly knows he is lying and steals all the money from where Brad has hidden it. She then runs away to find another man to fleece.

At a tile and cement convention in Atlantic City, Dolly overhears one man (Steve Crandall) mention a business deal for a million dollars, and she begins to work on him. Coquetry fails and she realizes that the only way to get at his money is by marrying him. When he proposes, she accepts, but as she packs to leave with him, Brad appears at her hotel room door and demands the money she ran off with. Dolly coyly says she lost it and offers him twenty dollars. He refuses it, but steals it when she is not looking. Here, then, is a repetition, in reversed fashion, of what had happened between them earlier.

Once again, Brad demands to be cut into her current plan. She agrees and tells him to hide in the bathroom until he hears her cough. He does so. Room service, which she had called earlier, arrives and Dolly whispers to the bellhop to wait outside. Brad thinks Steve has arrived. Dolly packs quickly, while carrying on a conversation as though a man were in the room; she signals the bellhop back into the room to remove her luggage quietly. All this time Brad waits for her signal. After she has left with the luggage a maid enters the room to straighten it. She sees the things brought up by room service and helps herself to them. She lights a cigarette, inhales, and then coughs. Brad, thinking it the signal he has been waiting for, bursts into the room only to discover that he has been tricked again.

Now married to Steve, Dolly learns that he is not wealthy and in disgust she runs away trying to find another mark. But she comes to realize that she has fallen in love with Steve and returns to him. At various points in the film she has used tears to distract men and convince them that she was helpless rather than predatory. Now her change is marked by sincere tears which reveal her honest love for Steve. She decides to hide her past, but Brad and Gwen find her again and threaten to reveal her identity to Steve unless she helps them to swindle him. Steve has sold a formula for extra-hard cement and Brad means to be his 'business advisor'. In a moment of self-sacrifice, however, Dolly reveals her past to Steve as well as her original reason for marrying him. In doing so, she acts to protect his interests even though she expects to lose his love as a result. Happily, he still loves her after he learns the truth.

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Dolly is a confidence-woman who continually outsmarts herself. The basic repetitive pattern in which Brad and Gwen

reappear occasionally to threaten her with exposure is a structural device that organizes the narrative of the film while continuously reminding the audience of the way that her racket may turn against her. In addition, the final threat from Brad and Gwen, involving Steve, ends the repetitive series by presenting the audience with the opportunity to review the entire film retrospectively. Even the film's final setting, a suite of hotel rooms in New York City, invites retrospection since it was the initial milieu where Dolly picked out her first victim. Thus in each of the films that I have mentioned in which the conclusion occurs in the same locale as the movie's opening sequences, the qualitative differences between the two situations reveal both the purpose of the film and the vehicle through which an audience is brought to feel that the problem has been finally resolved. To understand this, however, one must recognize the several functions that repetition can perform.

At its basic level, a simple repetitive series creates both a sense of comprehension within an audience, as well as the sort of pleasure that comes from having an expectation fulfilled. In the series A B C A B C A B C, once the pattern is perceived, an audience both understands the rationale that generates it and from an awareness of it, extrapolates the expectation that the basic unit of the series, A B C, will continue to recur, while it is not easy to point out exactly where in the series an audience would realize the underlying pattern — it would probably coincide with the second C or the third A — once it did, the forming of expectations about following elements would begin. This sort of series has two drawbacks, however. Firstly, once the organizational logic of the series has been understood, subsequent repetitions would become boring unless they were presented as light variations of one another. However much pleasure there might have been in seeing its expectations realized, an audience may finally come to feel the sameness of the pattern and lose interest in it. Secondly, this kind of series is open-ended. In other words, there is no special, inherent reason for the series to end after ten repetitions of the basic unit rather than after twenty or thirty repetitions. Though the point at which boredom replaces the pleasure of fulfilled expectations might seem to indicate a functional end point for the series. It is not necessarily a reduction, nor is it emotionally satisfying.

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Translating this concept of serial repetition from the level of alphabetical symbols, to that of narrative content, one can understand how narrative concerns provide a naturally inherent point at which a series is brought to conclusion. Though I know of no writers who have treated this problem in cinematic terms, it has been examined in terms of poetry by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*. As she describes the problem of bringing a series to conclusion: "...it is clear that a poem cannot continue indefinitely; at some point the state of expectation must be modi-

fied so that we are prepared not for continuation but for cessation. Closure, then, may be regarded as a modification of structure that makes stasis, or the absence of further continuation, the most probable succeeding event. Closure allows the reader to be satisfied by the failure of continuation or, put another way, it creates in the reader the expectation of nothing.¹⁵

Elsewhere, she defines 'closure' as 'the sense of stable conclusiveness, finality, or "clinch"'¹⁶ that one feels when a series comes to a conclusion instead of simply ending. Since closure generally occurs at the end of a work, the final element of a series of repetitions — the last appearance of the basic minimal unit — invites an audience to review the entire series retrospectively. Smith's comments on this phenomenon are especially cogent: 'Although stability implies composure and absence of further expectations, this does not mean that our experience of the work ceases abruptly at the last word. On the contrary, at that point we should work not now as a succession of events, but as an integral design. ...The "ultimate stability" of the work refers not to a point at which the observer's or reader's experience is "finished", but to a point at which without residual expectations, he can experience the structure of the work as, at once, both dynamic and whole.'¹⁷

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To return to *Lady of Chance*. Dolly ends by being caught in a special and more dangerous kind of double-bind. Where Brad's and Gwen's first threats to expose her merely involved the police finding her, their last threat involves exposing her past to the man she loves. In each case, the threat of exposure is a constant theme. Dolly's resolution of the final threat of the series is particularly satisfying because it also involves a resolution of the other threats as well. In order to prevent Brad and Gwen from carrying out their final threat, Dolly admits everything, herself, to her husband. At this point, the initial threats of exposure to the police are resolved gratuitously. A detective who has been searching for her from before the beginning of the movie, and who has recognized her in the hotel's lobby, arrives with other officers to arrest her. They appear immediately after Dolly's confession to Steve and actually prevent Brad, enraged by her confession, from harming Dolly. Thus what had haunted Dolly throughout the film, her arrest by the police, finally saves her when she is faced with potential harm.

An even simpler and more common method of achieving closure occurs in *Happiness* (directed by King Vidor, 1923). The film's main character, Jenny Wreay, is a poor but proud young woman who means to own an exclusive dress shop one day. The film opens with her as an errand girl in an exclusive dress shop. In a few years, she does open her own shop, without any aid from a wealthy group of people she has met. The film ends with the arrival there of a young girl, also named Jenny, who applies for the job of errand girl at the salary of eight dollars a week,

the same amount as the now successful Jenny used to earn. The kind of retrospective patterning that Smith describes is recognizable here.

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Perhaps the clearest way to understand how much this Gestaltist approach to structure can contribute to descriptive film criticism might be through its application to *Lonesome* (directed by Paul Fejos, 1928). The film follows the usual format of love stories: boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-finds-girl. The problem of credibility is complicated by the fact that the pair, Jim and Mary, live next door to one another throughout the film. Their accidental discovery of this precipitates their reunion at the end of the film. Their isolation despite residing in adjoining apartments neatly conveys the lonesomeness of a large city, New York in the film, yet the movies' resolution runs the serious risk of seeming to be no more than contrived cuteness. Fejos prevents this from occurring, by a very careful repetitive structure that includes most of the patterns I have mentioned as well as others.

Perhaps the best way to describe the sort of repetitive unit that Fejos provides in the film is to delineate it as a situation which two people share in some way without being aware of their common interest in it. Thus the film opens with a sequence in which both Mary and Jim awaken, dress, and leave for work. The shared situation here is the time of day and the same general set of actions. Their separation is accentuated visually by presenting the pair out of synchronization. Jim awakens later than Mary and must rush through the same routine that she follows. Next, both appear in the same restaurant for breakfast but do not come into contact with one another. Mary has a full tray of food and eats a leisurely meal while Jim, because he is still late, hurriedly gulps a cup of coffee at the counter, wolfs down a doughnut, and rushes out with another doughnut between his teeth. Each is then shown on the subway and, then, arriving at work at the same plant and going through the same process of changing into work clothes. Finally, each punches in at a separate time clock. In all of this they never meet or notice one another.

At this point, Fejos establishes their proximity through a lateral camera movement that dissolves a shot of Mary at a switchboard into a shot of Jim at a machine in the shop. When the camera pans to the left, the shot of Jim appears; when it pans to the right, Mary appears. This sequence presents them at work throughout the work day. Fejos continues their association with the same block of time, in fact, by superimposing a clockface over their images in this long sequence. Where they had been out of synchronization before, they are now equals in terms of the time of the work day.

Since it is the Third of July, the work day ends at one o'clock for the holiday weekend. Fejos again presents the pair in parallel situations when they emerge from the plant and emphasizes it through

more panning from right to left. This time, however, Jim is established at the right and Mary at the left as they stand outside their respective entrances to the plant, each surrounded by co-workers of the same sex. As the sequence continues, intercutting between the two groups, the women around Mary are met by their boyfriends, and the men around Jim met by their girlfriends. No one meets Mary or Jim, though each is invited by different couples to join them for the weekend. Each declines the offer.

Back in their respective apartments, neither can concentrate, feeling oppressed by the heat and the prospect of a lonely weekend. Both look out of their windows, in turn, and notice that music is coming from a passing sound track advertising weekend fun at Coney Island. Both decide to go there. Here, the sound track provides the associational linkage between the two that the time of day or the space of the restaurant and factory had provided earlier. The resolution of the film will also occur through an aural linkage.

It is on the bus to Coney Island that Jim first notices Mary. Though separated from her by the other passengers, and by other crowds when they alight, he finally catches up with her and begins to court her. Eventually, they change into bathing suits and sit together on the beach. They begin to fall in love. Where they had been out of synchronization with each other, then in synchronization during work, they are now alike in their obliviousness to clock time. A bell rings to announce the closing of the beach at six o'clock, but they do not hear it. As darkness falls, they are still sitting, alone, on the now deserted beach. Where they had been lonely in the midst of crowds, their companionship now renders the presence of absence of a crowd immaterial. Thus this sequence is also a reversal, in the terms of its effects upon the couple, of the earlier sequence at the factory where the dispersion of the crowd made Jim and Mary feel their loneliness more acutely. Originally oblivious of one another, they are now oblivious of everyone but each other.

After changing clothes, Jim wins a doll for Mary and takes her to dine at a restaurant in the amusement park, where after eating, they dance to the song 'Always' and then leave to ride the roller coaster. Up to the point, the movement of the film has been from their separate isolation to their shared companionship on the beach and at dinner. With the roller coaster Fejos re-establishes their separation. The roller coaster, known as a 'Derby Racer', consists of two trains of cars that run on parallel tracks and race one another. Thus their separateness also re-establishes the earlier theme of the lack of synchronization between the couple. Indeed, Jim and Mary are separated at the ride and forced to sit in different trains. Mary sits in the right-hand seat of the first right-hand car, while Jim sits in the left-hand seat of the first left-hand car. The physical design of the roller coaster trains, then, repeats the earlier lateral camera movements that established Jim and Mary

in terms of left and right. As the trains race each other, a fire begins in the wheels of Mary's car. Though both trains are brought to a stop, Jim cannot get to her because of the crowd surrounding her car. This repeats the difficulty he had in reaching her when they first arrived at Coney Island. In fact, a policeman tells Jim to get out of the way and arrests him when Jim continues trying to get to Mary.

When Jim returns to the ride Mary is no longer there. She had fainted when the fire began and then gone in search of him after coming to. Jim and Mary know only each other's first name, and now search for one another by showing the others' picture to carnival barkers. Though they cross and recross one another's path, they never meet. They even rest against opposite sides of the same pillar: a variant of the way in which they have been unaware of sharing neighbouring apartments as well.

It begins to rain and each gives up the search. When Jim returns home he places a recording of "Always" on his phonograph. In her apartment, Mary pounds on the wall because someone next door is playing "Always" too loudly on the phonograph. Jim rushes next door to quiet his neighbour and discovers that it is Mary. Happily, they are reunited. And it is their mutual interest in the same object, the song "Always", that brings them finally together.

To a large extent these repetitive patterns in *Lonesome* exist to earn the otherwise improbable resolution. In any event, they are of no interest at all, as patterns, to Jim and Mary. The patterns do manage, however, to insure that an audience is continually aware of what is happening, and has happened, while additionally preparing it, in emotional terms, for the manner of the film's resolution. The discovery that Jim and Mary have shared adjacent apartments all along forces the audience, moreover, to view the film retrospectively since it explains both the arrangement of scenes and the alternating narrative passages that focus on Jim and Mary separately going through similar routines.

With a greater familiarity of these types of narrative structures, a critic is in a much firmer position to interpret the narrative structures of more ambiguous, artist-centred films. Such a descriptive critical analysis as I have outlined here should also help to deal with those numerous studio films that many feel are not quite worthy of analysis.

Marshall Deutelbaum

¹ R C Dale, 'René Clair in Hollywood: An Interview', *Film Quarterly*, 20 no 2 (Winter, 1970-71), 37-38.

² King Vidor, *A Tree is a Tree* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1953), p. 272.

³ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), p. 278.

⁴ I am indebted to Raymond Durnat's discussion of this distinction between directorial attitudes in 'Art and Audience', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 10, no 1 (January, 1970), p. 11-24.

⁵ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 33-34. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967) offers an extended discussion of the reasons why the conclusions to narrative works provide such high degrees of pleasure.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.



Oshima's The Ceremony

The latest film of Nagisa Oshima, *The Ceremony* (*Gishiki*, 1971), reintroduces the theme of 'decadence' to the cinema. Through the representation of the decay and self-destruction of a great family from the Japanese upper bourgeoisie, Oshima suggests the analogous historical regression of post-war Japan. Here we shall consider only two elements, in what is one of the most complex and problematical, as well as stylistically refined films, to be made in recent years. The first of these elements is the choice by Oshima, exceptional innovator though he is, of a classical language and of a romanesque definition of the characters of the film; and the second is the articulation of the film as a series of spectacles, in the form of family ceremonies.

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The choice of a classical narrative style is clearly linked to the 'spectacular' type of structure. It is not to be seen as a concession to the public, which has for a long time become perfectly accustomed to taking in and enjoying old stories in a new stylistic wrapping. Nor is it to be interpreted as a pause on Oshima's part in his pursuit of new expressive techniques which in the past has driven him in a variety of directions with no definite connection between them.² It is rather a consequence of the discourse on decadence which dominates the film thematically. This decadence, however, is viewed by an author who does not consider himself part of it and can therefore extend its meaning to comprehend all the values represented, whether on a political, family or individual level, and represent them together at their point of convergence, the spectacle of the ceremony.

One is reminded of the scene in *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (*Ensayo de un crimen*, 1955) in which Buñuel represented the marriage of the central character as it was viewed, off-screen, by a trio of pillars of the community, a priest, a general and a bourgeois. The three figures exchanged words

THE SPECTACLE OF DECADENCE

Notes on the Vanishing Hero

of admiration for the sanctity of marriage and for the beauty of the décor of the marriage ceremony. Like his characters, but without their uncritical enthusiasm, Buñuel has constantly reflected on the ceremonies which codify the permanence of a society, with an eye however to the steady and progressive social decomposition which the appearances concealed. Significantly the marriage in *The Criminal Life* ends in murder. More than social and collective decadence Buñuel's theme has been the decadence of ideals. The noisy pop music which accompanies the conclusion of *Viridiana* (1961) and *Simon del desierto* (1965) symbolises the triumph of what the two 'saints' had fought against and is just one more smirk by Buñuel in the direction of the ultra-modern façade of a world that has long reached the point of disintegration. In his old age Buñuel seems to have understood what Oshima also shows signs of seeing, but which is not even hinted at by lots of modern directors, from Godard downwards. *Tristana* (1970), like *Belle de Jour* (1966) before it, regards the catastrophe as *having already happened*, and crystallises its symptoms (physical and moral decay) in a system which has nothing to do with contemporary actuality. But what Buñuel allows to happen to *Viridiana*, *Simon* and his other heroes with enlightened ideals has not happened to himself: he has simply adapted his weapon, the cinema, to a society in which prophecies of its own doom serve merely to defer it.

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'...More and more I try not to load my films with moral certitudes... They have become less obvious... Well, this is the direction in which I'm beginning to work. Life is too complicated for facile statements... My opinions today are less cut and dried. There was a time when I thought that neat formulas and clear solutions were justified, but I don't think that way any more. I think it's more important to let people reflect, to examine problems

and films, to understand that certain ideas they hold *a priori* just can't be the case, rather than say, 'We must stop making martyrs of children', 'Isn't it awful the way Mexican minorities are exploited', 'Prison conditions are terrible,' or whatever. A lot can be said inside a formula and my old films had a great impact for precisely that reason. They touched people who were concerned, and they've retained that power because people like that still exist, particularly young people. But I think young people should start thinking in a way which is a bit more complex. The world is complex, and if they don't do this they are in danger of being trapped in what I tried to show in *Modesty Blaise*, a mixture of irresponsibility, nihilism, egoism and vulgarity.'

This declaration of Losey, made at the

Minnelli's The Bandwagon



Losey's The Damned

time of *Accident*, helps to clarify, on the one hand, the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes his American from his English period, and on the other hand the meanings of one of his least understood and appreciated films,⁴ *Modesty Blaise*. A symbol of the relationship between the two periods of Losey's work can be found in two characters played by MacDonald Carey, in *The Lawless* (1949) and *The Damned* (1961). One should not see the link in terms of an increasing abdication of responsibility.⁵ We are dealing rather with a division in terms of a changing context. Whereas the struggle against 'the exploitation of Mexican minorities' could at least claim a partial victory — which makes the hesitations of the journalist Carey even less excusable — the equally individual struggle of Carey the tourist against the atomic threat is merely ridiculous. Losey grants the hero of *The Damned* a gentle end: he thinks he has succeeded in escaping, together with the girl, from the last helicopter pursuing him, and he sets out to sea in the motor boat in which he had arrived to spend his holidays, but in reality he is mortally contaminated by radiation. The helicopter looks down on him from above; in the same way a helicopter will strike down Robert Shaw at the end of *Figures in a Landscape* (1970) after he has challenged it, although he was in a position to escape. The struggle becomes more and more unequal with each new film, for Losey, unlike Buñuel and unlike his former collaborator Brecht, believes that this is the real relationship between dominant power and revolutionary-subversive potential. In his latest films, therefore, he devotes himself to delineating the representatives of authority in their moment of absolute splendour. There is no difference between past and present in *The Go-Between* (1971): physical ageing is taking place during the same 'suspended' time of the Edwardian summer.

Rather than the relatively positive parable of *The Servant* (1963), which repre-

sents not so much the progressive collapse of the central character as his increasing awareness of the fact of his own collapse, it is the fable of *Modesty Blaise* (1966) which presents the ceremonial of decadence in the form of spectacle. The cartoon-strip characters, the false décors and the trendy colours are objectified by Losey in the same way as Oshima was to objectify in *The Ceremony* the false splendour of family reunions. In the midst of a global moral disaster the defeat of the super-criminal Gabriel (Dirk Bogarde) in *Modesty Blaise* demonstrates ironically that the reversal of the status quo consists solely in a descent into the abyss of mass culture, with Gabriel bound and forced to listen to trashy music on a transistor radio while calling vainly 'Champagne, Champagne!'

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Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930), like Losey's *The Servant*, seems at first sight to take as its theme the decadence of the central character and of his social class. But in reality Professor Rat (Emil Jannings) thanks to the beneficent (and not evil) effects of his infatuation with the singer is able gradually to open his eyes to an unknown reality. It is not the loss of his Prussian ideals but the discovery that they have long faded away from the historical scene that will bring about his death. According to Sternberg's autobiography,⁶ he used this character to get his revenge on one of his schoolteachers. This Freudian motivation, together with his reiterated opposition to any influence of contingent external reality in his films, leads us to take at face value Sternberg's dismissal of people who see sociological connections in *The Blue Angel*. Even in his first, and most 'social' film, *The Salvation Hunters* (1925), the characters were mere abstractions, the dramatic situations pure allegories and material objects touchstones of truth. Nonetheless he too is the poet of a decadence which is irremediable, and external to his films.

As the character of Marlene's former husband, sunk to the role of clown who never laughs, reveals in *The Blue Angel*, the 'fall' is cyclical and Marlene is the agent who provokes it. Even in *The Last Command* (1928), the humiliation and death of the Russian Grand-Duke (Emil Jannings) when he comes to Hollywood, have as their 'agent' a director of Russian origin revenging himself on a former enemy. In this film Sternberg portrays a 'class struggle', whose aim is a reversal of marxist principles: the Grand-Duke's heroic death, although a product of exaggerated cinematic invention, leaves the piebeian director shattered and wide-eyed. The dialectic of redemption through a final gesture does not however save Sternberg from a profound scepticism: his description of Hollywood at the beginning of *The Last Command* is one of the blackest that the American cinema has ever produced, a sure sign that he understood fully from what situation his messages in a bottle had to be sent out.

The theme of the 'decadence of Hollywood', which has recently been taken up by directors who have neither lived it nor understood it, like Agnès Varda or Michelangelo Antonioni, has received serious treatment in two films of Minnelli, *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) and *Two Weeks in Another Town* (1962), which focus respectively on Hollywood itself and Hollywood-on-Tiber, alias Rome. The latter film makes explicit references to the former, and furthermore the hero of them both, Kirk Douglas, symbolises, through his own decline from omnipotent producer to failed alcoholic actor, the decline of the Hollywood film industry. Minnelli registers this from the inside, since he has been a part of it and maybe feels himself to a certain degree responsible. More subtle is his treatment of the question of the musical in *The Band Wagon* (1952). At the beginning of the film Fred Astaire plays himself as he was in the early fifties, a great showman with a prodigious past who is attempting a come-back. The 'Faustian' musical in which he finds himself unwillingly involved is overcome by a hasty return to the classic American tradition and its most conventional folklore motifs. The final triumph of Astaire and his show is therefore a warning addressed both to the wave of 'European' intellectualism caricatured in the figure of the director Jeffrey Cordova (played by Jack Buchanan) and to the public's forgetfulness towards the stars of the past. But the triumphant ending of this as of so many other film musicals has no motive other than in the obligatory optimism of the genre. As we have seen *The Band Wagon* represents and contains in itself the germs of the very disease it tries to exorcise: old age, the neglect of tradition, the incomprehension of the public.

It could be maintained that it is the archetypal musical, the show that shows a show being put on, which has become the most significant ceremony in the cinema in the west over the last 30 years. In Oshima's film, *The Ceremony*, the scene in which the sumptuous marriage of the

central character is carried on in the absence of the bride, with everyone behaving as if she were there, recalls the good old command 'The show must go on!' and even the solitary dances of Astaire or Kelly when their partner is away. This indicates why it is that musicals, like ritualised ceremony, need the presence of all the actors ('Tous en scène' aptly is the French title of *The Band Wagon*) but survive as pure 'forms' when one or all the participants are absent.

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Consciousness of decadence and of the coming of the end, whether individual or social, as exemplified by Chaplin (Calvero) in *Limelight* (1952), receives a representation by transference in the character of the dancer who wants to commit suicide (Claire Bloom). The death from which Calvero saves her and the life and the art which he gives are values susceptible of transmission because, in Chaplin's version, the younger generation is simply a little more desperate than the old. *Limelight*, like *The Band Wagon*, is a film full of positive and constructive ideas, but seems to believe in them hardly at all. Whereas in his silent comic films he started with a surreal character thrown into the middle of a social reality which few other directors of his day dared to represent, everything in *Limelight* is deliberately 'theatrical' and the war which breaks out is nothing but an artifice of the narrative. The speech at the end of *The Great Dictator*, when Chaplin removes the mask to address the public, and usually interpreted as a great hymn to human and democratic values, was also a way of registering the failure to have any grip on the enormity of real events. Even Chaplin's progress from crazy comedy to drama with the occasional, isolated 'comic' moments (as in *Limelight*) indicates an increasing lack of faith in the well-aimed custard pie as a political weapon.

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The most 'scenic' and unreal sequence in *The Ceremony* is that of the suicide of the sole heir of the great family, whose gesture represents the self-destruction of his entire house. Oshima chooses for the scene the same violent red tonality which is the chromatic characteristic of Visconti's *The Damned* (*La caduta degli dei*, 1969). Visconti's film also ends with a ceremonial suicide, that of Friedrich and Sophie (Dirk Bogarde and Ingrid Thulin) after the marriage staged for them by the Nazis. Visconti, through the character of Martin, his incest with his mother and the organisation of her marriage and suicide, prophesies the rise of new gods, freed from bonds of kinship. Where Oshima uses the suicide of the young heir to endorse the end of the dominant class, Visconti shows it simply undergoing a change of function and behaviour. Even in *Death in Venice* (1971) the 'prophecy' is limited to the past. Visconti makes his own the philosophy expressed in *The Leopard* of 'everything changes and everything remains the same'. Death, fall and

decay represent an act of faith on Visconti's part that decadence is an infinite process.

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The passing of time and of the seasons which creates 'naturally' the myth of a golden past, such as we find in Minnelli's *Meet Me in Saint Louis* (1944), can be contrasted with Fellini's antithetical vision in *Roma* (1972), for which any past is golden given the misery of the present. Fellini certainly idealises that past less than either Visconti or Minnelli, but he opposes to it a hyper-negative present and in this way the past becomes a Garden of Eden and what it is open for us to feel today is... nostalgia. The fact that Fellini in his film makes himself the only point of reference, whether as individual or as history, and that he shuns any form of non-subjective representation, allows us almost to enter directly into his dreams and nightmares. The Rome which he dreamed of as a child, which he then encountered as a young man and which he no longer either understands or accepts, is a macroscopic symbol which fails however to resolve the triple problem of decadence — who decays and who evolves and who stays the same.

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A possible reply to all three questions is: spectacle. Like art, spectacle cannot be defined simply as a social outlet, a function, but is on the other hand the collective testament of individual suicide. This is why *The Ceremony* takes as its starting point, and continues to revolve around, the telegram of the victim who announces his own death: 'Terumichi dead Stop Terumichi'. The presentation of suicide as spectacle transcends the links with the Japanese tradition of *hara-kiri* and is transformed into an affirmation of the value of 'forms' after and beyond the disappearance of the actors.⁷

Kazan's *The Arrangement*: Kirk Douglas and Faye Dunaway



Even in the last shot of the film, which comes after the suicide of the heir and his wife, Oshima makes the spectacle continue. The central character, left alone, and possibly having gone mad, begins playing baseball as he did when he was a child, but with imaginary companions and without bat or ball. In a sense his 'regression' is a sort of happy ending, like the ending of many recent films, such as *The Arrangement*, *Charles mort ou vif*, *McCabe and Mrs Miller* or *Dillinger is Dead*, in which the characters who succeed in spite of everything in staying alive give themselves over to an unconscious ecstasy of release, resembling happiness. As actors, they escape into the role of spectators — which is our cue to leave.

Lorenzo Codelli

translated by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith

1 [Translator's Note] The Italian word 'romanesco' ('romanesque' in French) which means, roughly, 'novel-like', 'of the novel', has no equivalent in English. Since it is useful word for a language to have we have rendered it by its French equivalent.

2 Mixture of documentary and fiction in *Tokyo Senso Sengo Hiwa* (*Secret Story of Post-War Tokyo*, 1970); dreams, theatre and life in *Shinjuku Dorobo Nikki* (*Diary of a Shinjuku Thief*, 1968); theatre of the absurd and theatre of cruelty in *Koshikei* (*Death by Hanging*, 1968); static comic-strip technique in *Ninja Bugeicho* (*Band of Ninja*, 1968); non-chronological realism in *Hakuchū No Torima* (*Violence at Noon*, 1966); stills in *Yunbogi No Nikki* (*Diary of Yunbogi*, 1965); etc.

3 Joseph Losey, taken from an interview with Bernard Eisenschitz in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No 184, November 1966 [retranslated from the French].

4 An exception is Raymond Durnat in *Cinema* (Cambridge), No 1, December 1968.

5 As is claimed by James Leahy in *The Cinema of Joseph Losey*, Zwemmer, 1967, p. 104.

6 *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, Secker and Warburg, 1965, p. 7.

7 Kobayashi's film on *hara-kiri* as an instrument of religious and social oppression, *Seppuku* (1963), takes an opposite attitude to that of Oshima, who represents it in almost exalted tones.

Book Review

SIRK ON SIRK

By JON HALLIDAY

Cinema One

Secker & Warburg, London, 1971

Interviews, and even more so, interview books with movie directors are pretty risky affairs. For one thing, they almost invariably strike the wrong note, either too solemn or too flippant — both perfectly understandable pitfalls if one thinks of the situation. Imagine a director, especially if he is one of Hollywood's old guard, working in an industry which until recently couldn't give a damn about a director's public image, let alone his artistic integrity, and putting whatever talent and energy he had into the careful nurture of an indirect, oblique way of saying and doing what he thought important, suddenly being asked to talk about his films in a language that, even if he uses it at home, would have made him look a fool on every set in every studio.

Confronted with the keen earnestness of a movie buff and long-suffering admirer, such a director is in a dilemma, and some of them have evidently considered being interviewed too gratifying an experience, after years of neglect and misunderstanding, not to show a certain polite willingness to play along with the interviewer. Others instinctively display a total refusal to yield, even for a second, to the temptation of becoming — in public at least — fans of their own work and instead use the occasion for letting off a firework of well-rehearsed anecdotes and more or less pungent irrelevancies. Interviews seem to depend on the interviewer getting the level right: Hitchcock and Preminger are masters at making monkeys of their journalist admirers, and Bogdanovich has missed the mark three times, even though with Ford and Lang at any rate he was interviewing directors whose experience, intelligence and, finally, charitable nature has prevented anything associated with their names from being a total disaster.

What is it, moreover, that a moderately intelligent and informed critic can hope to get out of having his favourite directors in the flesh? It is hardly wise to expect them to confirm one's pet theories or interpretations, especially when they are well-founded and penetrating. Clarification of historical facts and data, then — of who got credited for the screenplay though he was sacked after three days, of how terribly the producer mangled the release version after the director's final cut had already been approved, or what a charming fellow X was to work with provided he was given enough liquor within the first hour's shooting to keep him drunk for the rest of the day. This is often good stuff to read and probably ought to have a place somewhere on

record, but it hardly clinches the case for a director's films — which is what interview books are unfortunately called upon to do these days while film-criticism is still in such bad shape.

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In the absence of a really worthwhile study, an interview book is therefore always in danger of becoming a promotion exercise, however well-meant, and can show the auteur-theory at its most questionable, because in this country, underdeveloped as it is in respect to film-culture, the machinery of book-publishing almost inevitably creates a cult and with it, an unhelpful polarity of cult- and anti-cultists, and also because it gives an unfair advantage to the articulate 'intentionalists' over the more reticent or inarticulate 'réalisateurs' among directors. It is unfortunately too easy to make even Mike Nichols' movies look good on paper.

The more fervent one's hopes for an interview-book about a director who really is outstanding and neglected as far as the critical establishment goes. But not only does *Sirk on Sirk* dispel one's apprehensions whether a good director can look after himself in an interview, because Sirk most certainly can, the book is the nearest thing to a vindication of interviews as a valid form of film-criticism, leaving aside the rather unique case of the Hitchcock/Truffaut venture, with which it otherwise invites comparison. What makes Halliday's book special to my mind is that it is at once too level-headed in its approach, too comprehensive in the intellectual framework it sets up, too modest in its claims and pretensions to present any danger of easy assimilation of Sirk's work and personality. This may sound a strange recommendation and curious praise indeed, but Sirk is a difficult director for a high-brow audience, not to say a challenge, even to the Hitchcock-Hawks faction, and it is only right that one faces up to it.

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The fact that (because Sirk hadn't seen most of his films for a decade or more) the interviews deal rather less with scenes and shots in individual films and more with Sirk's cultural background, his approach to Hollywood subjects, and the relation of the material conditions — scripts, actors, producers, studios — to what a director can hope to achieve with so many variables on his hands proves to be an asset, because it invites one to ponder the hiatus that seems to separate the pictures' manifest concerns from the mind that created them. The book shows a director at work who knows he has to devise aesthetic strategies in order to tackle the problems that the material presents as material, because he has responded to it not in terms of literary criteria derived from his own cultural tastes, but because he obviously respected whatever sentimental and imaginative experience was encapsulated in the kind of American lore that Hollywood was dedicated to transmitting. This characterizes Sirk's attitude to the melodrama, and the book is perhaps most interesting where it raises questions about why and with what justification complex high-brow aesthetic effects and the techniques of

serious drama are applied to undeniably low-brow and even pulp material, which — rightly or not — enjoys the emotional allegiance of millions. Sirk makes it quite clear that 'mass-entertainment' need neither be escapist nor vulgar, though it may seem to deal only with commonplace. 'You have to do your utmost to hate it — and to love it', Sirk says about the story-material he was given for *Magnificent Obsession*, and he goes on to explain, that 'if I had had to stage *Magnificent Obsession* as a play I wouldn't have survived. It is a combination of kitsch, and craziness and trashiness. This is the dialectic — there is a very short distance between high art and trash, and trash that contains the element of craziness is by this very quality nearer to art.'

Sirk as a director has excelled in keeping this distance always in mind, in fact, maintaining that degree of direct involvement and intellectual detachment necessary not just to function and survive under Hollywood conditions (for a long period he was exposed to the worst of these conditions) but to come out with at least half a dozen unquestionable masterpieces which show that he understood Hollywood almost better than it understood itself, and in his films the idiom is so perfect not least because it is a consciously acquired one. This gift for empathy, the cultural pragmatism in Sirk — what Sarris has called his willingness for 'direct confrontation of all material, however fanciful or improbable' — comes over very strongly in the book and makes it exactly right in tone, as well as an invaluable aid to situating a highly intellectual approach to picture-making (as Sirk's undoubtedly is) within an industry notorious for its anti-intellectualism. But it also provides a salutary corrective to the notion, still touted around as if it were self-evident, that Orson Welles was the only director of intelligence and culture who ever set foot inside Hollywood, and look what happened to him. Sirk is not alone in proving that the problem is a little more complex, and that intelligence or culture probably has very little to do with the vexing question whether Hollywood was great because of its directors or its directors were great because of Hollywood.

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To mention Welles, however, is not entirely out of context, because he shared with Sirk a similar belief that melodrama was the last form of tragedy in a bourgeois world and could be made an instrument of social critique. But Welles, even in his most deliberate 'genre' pictures, such as *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *The Stranger*, *The Lady from Shanghai* or *Touch of Evil* often tried rather hard not to let down his 'cultured background', by turning on an irony too brittle for him ever to become a director of popular pictures (if there is one thing that doesn't go down well with American audiences, it would seem to be the dry, unmistakably cerebral tone of mockery and self-mockery so noticeable in Welles' pictures following *Citizen Kane*). Sirk after initially working in a similar vein of sophisticated irony (cf *Scandal in Paris*) quickly realis-

ed that this was not the way to get at and to the American public within the same type of movie.

This is why the book quite rightly stresses what otherwise appears a rather too exalted ancestry for even the best of Hollywood directors — Sophocles, Lope de Vega, Molière, Shakespeare: Sirk understood himself to be, or rather worked consciously towards becoming a director with a materialist approach to his art, that is, of working dialectically inside what he knows to be his audience's expectations and demands, his conditions of production, and the possibilities of his chosen medium, thereby giving that much less importance to the artistic persona and to self-expression. And this attitude Sirk sees as being in the tradition of the great European popular drama: 'I became a kind of house director of Universal. Conditions were not perfect, but when I complained about a story, they would say to me "If you can get a star, great; you can have more money and pick a better story". But at least I was allowed to work on the material — so that I restructured to some extent some of the rather impossible scripts of the films I had to direct. Of course, I had to go by the rules, avoid experiments, stick to family fare, have "happy endings", and so on. Universal didn't interfere with either my camerawork or my cutting — which meant a lot to me. In a way, I did see their point of view, running a studio: a film has to make back its money... I think if Shakespeare were alive today he'd shake me by the hand and say "My dear boy, I know what it was like in Hollywood, I had to make money too, and a lot of my stories were lousy" — which they were.' And again: 'Even in plays it isn't the story that is important: if you think of all the silly plots Shakespeare had, and compare him with Walter Scott... it's language that counts. Now the place of language in pictures has to be taken by the camera — and by cutting.'

Similarly, when he talks about Euripides or *El Alcide de Zalamea* by Calderon and how they solved 'the apparent contradiction between an impossible situation and the need for a happy end' by the 'crude shocking manner' of the *deus ex machina*, and asserts that this is the perfect pattern for melodrama with a critical edge, one can see immediately how it is relevant to his own film-making: at least two of his movies contain exactly this kind of ending, and both thereby emphasize the tragic accents of the situation rather than weakening them. In *Shockproof* and *All I Desire* (two pictures on which he had studio interference) Sirk resorted to obviously 'staged', explicit yet quite unmotivated reversals whereby in almost identical terms the villain, after having been shot by the heroine, not only does not die but 'forgives' or 'confesses' so as to smooth the path for the lovers. Playing it tough right down the line and then jerking the plot out of its inevitably tragic groove is in the last instance probably less sentimental than the tragic ending which high-brow audiences seem to crave, and it is perhaps not an accident that the other Hollywood master

of this kind of volte-face dramaturgy is also a German with a distinctly 'classical' background, namely Fritz Lang (cf. *Fury*, *Woman in the Window*, *Beyond A Reasonable Doubt*), whose scenarios of fatality and tragic vision have been so much more readily accepted than those of the less vertiginously Pirandellian but equally subversive Sirk.

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It is at this point that I am most inclined to take issue with Halliday, in that he seems rather too anxious to give this subversive side in Sirk's work an implicitly Marxist flavouring — an interpretation he admittedly does not press, but which, when the issue does crop up, as in the discussion of *Battle Hymn*, he should perhaps have pressed a bit further, because seeing how little Sirk is inclined to agreeing with Halliday on why the film didn't come off (and giving, incidentally, an extremely pertinent explanation as to why the American cinema cannot easily make a distinction between a morally and a politically ambiguous situation), one suspects a greater divergence of opinion on the subject of left-wing politics and its relation to art than the book as a whole suggests. Now, there is no reason why, if such a divergence does exist, it should be discussed in a book of this kind, and there are very good reasons why in practice it isn't. And I may be labouring the point only because there has been a recent tendency among some film critics (though Halliday doesn't normally belong to them, as can be seen from his article on Rossellini in *Monogram* no 2) who want to rescue the directors they like not only aesthetically, but politically as well. To rewrite one's preference for, say, Fuller, or Ford, or Welles in the language of post-'68's *Cahiers du Cinéma*, designed explicitly to do away with auteurs and films as we know them, is not merely a case of wanting to have one's cake and choke on it, but also a form of mystification that English film criticism at this juncture can well do without. It betrays little confidence in either one's aesthetic judgement or one's political convictions — or for that matter, one's intelligence, — if they are so threatened that one needs an ideological pass-card before it's ok to like something and explain why.

It would be quite unjustifiable to bring up this point in connexion with Halliday's book, if it were not that precisely the still from *Battle Hymn* has a totally misleading caption, which, though probably meant as an in-joke for the benefit of those who have seen the movie, comes too near an act of bad faith for it to have stayed in and not leave a lingering doubt, especially in a book that as far as its documentation, annotation and research go, is a model of accuracy and painstaking care — so much so that one feels Halliday's admiration and love for Sirk's pictures has been, as it were, sublimated out of the text and gone as a kind of homage into the impeccable presentation.

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Clearly, Sirk as he emerges from *Sirk on Sirk* is a man of the left, even if he

isn't necessarily of the new left. His theatre-work during the Weimar Republic, the resolutely anti-Nazi stand in the 'thirties, his disillusionment with West-Germany's restoration since the war, his comments on America during the McCarthy era and the Vietnam war today, make this quite evident. But equally apparent, what interests him in his pictures is above all cultural decadence and moral ambiguity, 'bourgeois' subjects par excellence, which make him comparable to another left-winger of long standing, Joseph Losey. As a 'stylist', and as his frame compositions and use of images show, Sirk was influenced by theories of metaphor and symbolism derived from German romanticism, French *fin-de-siècle* and the teachings of Erwin Panofsky, as well as by Reinhardtian theatrical mise-en-scene and the pictorial values of expressionist stage-technique. With his training in the German classics and his thorough grasp of the dramatic structures of Greek tragedy, he is squarely within a recognizably German tradition of philosophical and aesthetic idealism, refined and at the same time tempered by having come into contact with the tough 'aristocratic' melancholy in the early, and the strident self-assertion of Germany in the late 'twenties, complemented subsequently by the equally tough self-reliance and stridently dynamic materialism of America. Sirk's ability to approach philosophically, or as one would say today 'theorize' the implications of his material keeps his pictures together even when they seem to be about 'trashy' subjects, because his education had provided him with a happy blend of German expressionism articulated through (but also held in check by) an unfailing reliance on the solid structures of classical drama, which — in the context of the subjects he was treating — acted as both reference point and distancing device.

His melodramas are thus the ruses of German idealism, which so often kept its hold on concrete reality by exposing itself to 'low-brow' culture-shocks, by a morality insisting on failure as inevitable, and by elaborating a mode of dramatic presentation, though perhaps parasitic on the society that supported classical art (and inevitably tried to emasculate, assimilate and exploit it), but which was also critical because it turned the expressionist emotional stance (what Sirk himself calls 'the craziness') against bourgeois rationality, hypocrisy and the pressures to conform. Having historicised and come to terms with the cynicism and stylishness of Weimar Germany (the very marks of a discredited idealist position), Sirk could fit himself rather well into Hollywood with its emphasis on style, the spectacle, and its endless toying with the discredited moral idealism of the American dream. If *Zu Neuen Ufern*, Sirk's most accomplished German film, makes one aware of how 'American' the German cinema was just before its collapse, *Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels* are in a strange sense the last *fleurs du mal* of German expressionism and Weimar culture.

Thomas Elsaesser

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